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***MacBird!*: A History and Feminist Critique of Barbara Garson's Radical Play**

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MacBird!: A History and Feminist Critique of Barbara Garson's Radical Play

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May, 2009

Dedication

These pages are dedicated to my extraordinary parents,

Joyce and Gayle Todd

Acknowledgements

My pursuit of the rare *MacBird!* has been inspired, guided, and supported by many people. Foremost among them is my supervisor, Dr. Stacy Wolf, whose genuine enthusiasm about my first *MacBird!* sighting, which occurred as a result of a research project in her "Performance and Politics of the Sixties" class years ago, fed my curiosity about the dormant play. Dr. Wolf's compelling and creative inquiry-based teaching, which I fortunately had the opportunity to enjoy throughout all of my years of graduate school, drew me back again and again to *MacBird!*.

All of my committee members have had significant influence on my work. Dr. Joni Jones, who graciously agreed to co-supervise my project late in the process, has for the past several years provided me a unique and long-overdue perspective of race and body politics that at one time ranged far beyond my ken. Dr. Jill Dolan has not only contributed valuable theory regarding feminist spectatorship, but she is also, herself, a courageous and vigilant living-proof model for me. Dr. James Loehlin has been continually insightful and encouraging, affording me rich opportunities in the Shakespeare at Winedale program, and offering wisdom at just the right times; he is a compassionate teacher whose mentorship I treasure. Daniel Alexander Jones is both teacher and guru; his Sherpa-like pedagogical style, while deeply intellectual, is nothing short of spiritual.

I am ever grateful to Dr. Lisa Moore, a masterful teacher and dear friend who first introduced me to the concept of feminist *studies* and Dr. James Ayres, who first proposed to me the notion of Shakespeare as recyclable. I am also deeply indebted to teacher-hero,

Dr. Linda Ferreira-Buckley, who has championed me over the years, and who supervised and mentored me in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Texas.

Many thanks to those who supported me in my research: Dr. Lynn Miller, Hollie Gayle Baker, Melissa Johnson, Suzanne Julian, Dr. Shanna Smith, Jim Zidar, and Lisa Lyons. I am also grateful to Daryl Morrison, Head of Special Collections at University of California, Davis and her staff; the staff at the Bancroft Library at University of California at Berkeley; the staff at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library; and Rick Watson and the reading room staff at the Harry Ransom Center. Very special thanks go to George Simmers for his unsurpassed generosity in conducting research for me in the Lord Chamberlain's files at the British Library.

Throughout this project, I have been blessed in the support of the members of The Weird Sisters Women's Theater Collective, particularly my dear friend and co-founder, Christa French, who generously provided crucial and critical feedback; innumerable friends, professionals, and colleagues who bolstered me, including Madge Darlington, Fadi Skeiker, Sabrina Bean, Vicki Yoder, Dr. Dayna Burnett, Noelle Fitzsimmons, Lisa Schergen, Dr. Paul Ragan Walters, Daniel Keegan, Kari Lane, David Miller, Louis Fantasia, Merrimac Jenkins, Kevin Anderson, Marni Graff, and K.T. Brill; and my ever-supportive and loving family: my parents, Joyce and Gayle Todd; my children, Zachary and Sarah Baker, Zane Baker and Lauren Bilbe, and Hollie Baker; and my siblings, Eric and Hazel Todd and Toni Todd Arrington.

Thanks and blessings to Barbara Garson for her generosity and genius.

***MacBird!:* A History and Feminist Critique of Barbara Garson's Radical Play**

Publication No. _____

Susan Gayle Todd, Ph.D.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

Supervisor: Stacy Wolf

Barbara Garson's controversial play, *MacBird!*, was written and produced during the Vietnam War era and Johnson administration. The satirical Shakespeare adaptation equates LBJ with Macbeth, the villainous tragic hero who murders his king in order to gain the Scottish crown. The implication that Johnson was responsible for the assassination of JFK created a fury of controversy among critics and the public, as well as the political leaders who were parodied.

The play was first published and circulated in 1966 as an underground leaflet. In 1967, it was produced off-Broadway with a cast that featured actors Rue McClanahan, William Devane, Cleavon Little, and Stacy Keach, who won an Obie Award for his performance of the title role. The show launched the careers of these actors. Critics were divided in their reviews of the play's literary merit, but all seemed to agree that the piece was shocking and significant because it flew in the face of patriotism and of reverence for presidential authority. At the time of its production, acclaimed theater critic Robert Brustein named *MacBird!* "the most explosive play" of the Sixties theater movement.

This dissertation presents the history of the play, within its social and political setting, from its inception through its production and abrupt disappearance at the peak of

its success, which coincided with the assassination of Robert Kennedy. Relying upon methodology that includes primary and secondary sources, as well as interviews with the playwright and others involved in the play, this work presents the publication and production history of *MacBird!*, public and White House response to the play, a contextual analysis under a feminist lens, and a final chapter on *MacBird!* as a precursor to feminist adaptations of canonical works, Sixties-era *Macbeth* adaptations, and the notable women whose work intersected in *MacBird!*

MacBird! was a tremendous event in theater history; it belongs at the fore of adaptation studies, particularly Shakespeare and feminist adaptation studies; it is a prime model of performance as a political tool and therefore earns a central place in performance studies; and because it is an attack on patriarchal power and a rare example of a Sixties radical play written by a woman, Barbara Garson needs to be recognized among remarkable women of theater.

Table of Contents

Introduction: *MacBird!*: A Sixties Phenomenon……..…1

The *MacBird!* Expedition: Primary Sources and Scholarship……5

Part I: History of *MacBird!* in Two Chapters.....7

Chapter One

Early *MacBird!*: Playwriting, Publishing, and Politics…….8

Caricature Illustrations by Lisa Lyons……..11

Early Printing……13

MacBird!'s Unprecedented Impact……...18

MacBird!: First Published JFK Conspiracy Theory……..21

From California to the New York Island……..23

Literary Merit……30

The White House……..44

LBJ's Decline……52

Chapter Two

Post-script *MacBird!*: Production on Stage, Record, and Film……..……60

Off-Broadway: *MacBird!'s* Difficult Debut…….61

Other Ventures……..68

MacBird! Abroad…….....70

The London Production……71

The Lord Chamberlain's Office……...72

The Littlewood Fiasco……..78

Censorship in Latin America……92

Augusto Boal's Brazil Production……....95

The Japanese Production……..97

Worldwide Desperation……..102

The *MacBird!* Movie……..105

Remembering *MacBird!* ……....111

Part II: Peri-feminist *MacBird!*……..113

Chapter Three

The Witch, the Lady, and the Patriarchs: A Textual and Historical Examination of the Emergence of Contemporary Feminism in Barbara Garson's Radical Play……....…118

The Witch……..…121

The Lady……..…143

The Patriarchs…….....160

Chapter Four

***MacBird!*: A Peri-feminist Model of Feminist Theater Praxis**……..172

Lady Macbeth in the Sixties……173

Macbird!: Precursor to Feminist Adaptation of the Canon.....184

Sixties Theater: A No-Woman's Land……..…….184

Feminist Adaptation of Classic Works……....187

Retooling the Canon: a Feminist Tradition……..189

Notable Women of *Macbird!*: Mcclanahan, Cole, Littlewood, and Garson……...203

Rue McClanahan: The First Lady of *MacBird!*..... 205

Toby Cole: Representing Garson and *MacBird!*.....209

Joan Littlewood, Director of London Production of *MacBird!*.....212

Barbara Garson…….217

Works Cited……..227

Vita……247

Introduction

MacBird!: A Sixties Phenomenon

MacBird!, a bitterly satirical Shakespeare adaptation written and produced during the Vietnam War era and Johnson administration, equates President Lyndon B. Johnson with Macbeth, the villainous tragic hero who assassinates his kinsman, King Duncan, in order to usurp the crown.

Although *MacBird!* has by now slipped largely into the margins of history, during the play's heyday, Garson was lauded for her "rapier-like caricature" and "Swiftian" satire by critics nationwide in such highly regarded publications as *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Daily News*, *The Kansas City Star*, *The Village Voice*, and *The Los Angeles Times* (Garson, *MacBird!).*

But the play also stirred tremendous controversy. With *MacBird!'s* pointed implication that Johnson was responsible for the death of JFK, Barbara Garson shocked and provoked a nation still grieving the loss of President Kennedy and beginning to doubt the actions of President Johnson, who continued to escalate the increasingly unpopular Vietnam war. Furthermore, because *MacBird!* attacked Johnson's character, as well as his policies and decisions regarding the Vietnam war, the play stirred a fury of protest and resentment among the nation's citizens, including those in power. *MacBird!'s* publication and production put to test post-McCarthyism resolutions regarding freedom of speech and the press.

The play was first published and circulated as a subversive, underground leaflet, which was eventually produced off-Broadway. Critics were divided in their assessment of

MacBird!'s so-called literary merit, but they generally agreed that the piece was shocking and significant because it flew in the face of patriotism and of reverence for presidential authority. At the time of its production, acclaimed theater critic Robert Brustein named *MacBird!* "the most explosive play" of the Sixties theater movement:

> The seditious implications of MacBird are clear and apparent—it is a work in which all political leaders are seen as calculating, power hungry, and bloody, and nobody comes off well. But although the play is bound to start a storm of protest (not all of it unjustified), it will very probably go down as one of the most brutally provocative works in American theatre. (*Third Theatre* 9-10)

Part of Brustein's prediction turned out to be accurate: public reaction to Garson's play was unprecedentedly tempestuous. Controversy and protest surfaced in the press from both journalists and readers, in letters to the White House, through confidential correspondence within the White House, among the theater community, and during actual play productions, even in the form of bomb threats (McClanahan 136). However, contrary to Brustein's prophecy that *MacBird!* would be remembered for its extremism, today the play remains relatively obscure compared to other Sixties movement plays. *Viet Rock* and other radical plays of the period have been anthologized and featured more frequently in scholarly theater journals. For the most part, *MacBird!*, when referenced, tends to be mentioned in passing.

Further, *MacBird!* preceded and very likely influenced two other avant garde *Macbeth* adaptations of the period, one by Richard Schechner, entitled *Makbeth After*

Shakespeare and another, *A Macbeth*, by Charles Marowitz, as well as other radical sixties Shakespeare adaptations, such as Joseph Papp's irreverent production of *Hamlet* (Rozett 118).

None of this is to say that *MacBird!* has been ignored entirely. Over time, various authors have occasionally pointed to *MacBird!* as a model of subversive Sixties theater, satirical rhetoric, and successful independent publishing. In his 1975 collection of essays on theater of the period, *The Culture Watch*, Robert Brustein wrote retrospectively of *MacBird!'s* significance:

> Perhaps the crucial event in opening up our stage was the off-Broadway production of Barbara Garson's *MacBird* . . . [which was] clearly an impudent and vituperative slander, but it had an extraordinary influence and liberating impact on what was to follow. Looking back on it after six years of uninhibited theatrical activity, it is almost impossible to describe how unusual it seemed at the time, and what a singular act of courage it represented. Suffice it to say, it was a work without precedent. (36)

My dissertation is a full account and synthesis of *MacBird!,* its history, and its significance in American theater and radical[1] activism, in two parts. While I take a general approach to *MacBird!* in Part I, underlying and implicit throughout my treatise is a feminist viewpoint of the play, its author, and its historical context. These are

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[1] I use the term "radical" to refer to Sixties groups, ideas, and initiatives that used extremist methods to defy the so-called establishment. Radical theater, then, included non-traditional or avant-garde performance that challenged the status quo.

emphasized in Part II in a feminist critique of the play, its context, and those involved in it.

Among those playwrights who are acclaimed for adapting Shakespeare to subversive ends, *MacBird!'s* author, Barbara Garson, is relatively seldom mentioned, perhaps in part because of the age and gender of the young female playwright whose radical approach predated and, according to Brustein and others, influenced heavily more "notable" contributors. Or perhaps it is because Garson is not herself a theater critic like Charles Marowitz, Richard Schechner, Peter Brook, and other politically-motivated artists who have continually logged and analyzed their own work. Be that as it may, at long last, it is important to recognize this remarkable playwright/activist who courageously adapted the most traditionally entrenched, patriarchal text (Shakespeare) to challenge and subvert the political and social "establishment" of her time and whose work revolutionized American theater during the radical Sixties, and to examine the ways in which *MacBird!* not only influenced Sixties theater, but also spoke to and through radicalism in general and the emerging women's movement in particular.

I will explain in detail these points about the extraordinary *MacBird!* and playwright Garson, and I will promote this play, which carried such universal impact that producers around the world were vying for theater and film rights; which raised public outcry and invited FBI investigation in the United States; which challenged censorship the world over; which sold half a million copies; which enjoyed a long off-Broadway run, and for which its title role actor, Stacy Keach, won an Obie award; which launched the careers of many; which won glowing praise from foremost critics and theater

practitioners; and which influenced profoundly the theater of the time. Given its far-reaching impact, I initially imagined that the long neglect of Garson and *MacBird!* as momentous in theater history was due primarily to that socially embedded tendency for women's work to be marginalized or erased while male accomplishment on the same playing field tends to be recognized and remembered. But as the following chapters reveal, that is only one factor in the extinguishment and near-obfuscation of the explosive *MacBird!.* Whatever the reasons for its semi-erasure, I hope above all that this re-collection of *MacBird!* will call attention and long-due recognition to one of our most talented politically motivated playwrights and to an astounding event in theater history.

The *MacBird!* Expedition: Primary Sources and Scholarship

My first encounter with *MacBird!* occurred years ago in the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. There, in the extensive archival collection of Sir Donald Albery, along with correspondence and news clippings, were the original play programs and black-and-white glossy photographs of the cast. Years later, on a hunch, I discovered that the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, a treasure trove of historic Sixties archives, contained substantial material related to *MacBird!* as well. With these primary sources alone (which by good luck happened to reside in Austin where I live), along with reviews and various scholarly references to the play, I felt confident I could piece together the story of *MacBird!* and present a competent and accurate account of its history.

Eventually, however, I came to discover much more. Most revealing and valuable of all, from a historical perspective, has been the Toby Cole Collection at the University of California at Davis. All of the records of Garson's agent, Toby Cole, are housed there,

at the Shields Library. The collection contains fascinating documents pertaining to the play. Other primary sources contributing to my work are in The City Lights Collection at the University of California at Berkeley's Bancroft Library.

As it happened, I also recently contacted George Simmers, British author of an online research blog entitled *Great War Fiction*. Simmers graciously volunteered to research the Lord Chamberlain's Papers at the British Library in London, which turned up a "thick [file] that reveals the story of the British censorship of the play quite fully" (Simmers E-mail 30 Jan 09).

Fortunately, from the time I first contacted her, playwright Barbara Garson has responded to me graciously and generously. I recall our first phone interview when I tried to assure her I would present all of my writing to her before using any information she supplied. Garson replied sharply, and in what I would come to learn was her typically humorous style, "NO! Don't do that! No one ever likes what you say about them. If Shakespeare showed Hamlet what he'd written, Hamlet would say, 'No, I'm not all that serious! That's not like me at all.' It's your work. That's what fact checkers are for" (2 Jan 2008). To date, Barbara Garson has supplied numerous and invaluable phone, email, and personal interviews, as well as leads to other individuals who have contributed firsthand perspectives regarding their involvement with *MacBird!*.

These interviews, manuscripts, and other primary sources, combined with play reviews from the period, scholarly writings from the past four decades, and the script itself, have shed light and served as component pieces of the history of *MacBird!* and the theatrical event of a decade that bespoke the tenor of the Sixties.

Part I: History of *MacBird!* in two Chapters

Part I of this dissertation exhumes and examines, as chronologically and thoroughly as possible, the people, events, and responses surrounding *MacBird!*, a play that was literally heard 'round the world; in addition to being a significant radical underground credo, it became a resounding off-Broadway hit that toured the United States and played in scores of other countries, produced and directed by the likes of Joan Littlewood in London and Augusto Boal in Brazil. It was lauded by Robert Brustein, Peter Brook, Luis Valdez, Martin Esslin, and Joseph Papp, among other renowned theater practitioners of the time, as phenomenal. Because of *MacBird!'s* tremendous impact, implicit in this historical account is an argument that such a play, that raised such controversy and was at once so sought-after, despised, resonant, entertaining, and shocking belongs in the canon of Sixties radical theater, alongside such works as *Viet Rock*, *Hair*, and *America Hurrah*, and especially among the radical adaptations of Shakespeare created and directed by Charles Marowitz, Peter Brook, Joseph Papp, and Richard Schechner, among others, who re-imagined classic plays to create a resonant protest against the establishment. The following chapters demonstrate the international importance and influence *MacBird!* has had in politically motivated theater and argue for its place in the canon of radical theater.

Chapter One

Early *MacBird!*: Playwriting, Publishing, and Politics

The story behind *MacBird!* is as fascinating and dramatic as the play itself. It all began in August of 1965 when Barbara Garson, a 25-year-old student protestor, was speaking publicly at a peace rally at The University of California at Berkeley. Garson was inspired by her own slip of the tongue when she unintentionally referred to then-first lady, Lady Bird Johnson, as Lady MacBird. Connections between the prolific bird imagery in *Macbeth* and the bird names in the Johnson clan (Lady Bird and daughter Linda Bird), coupled with the untimely death of a leader (John F. Kennedy) under the hospitality of his successor, apparently inspired Garson to write the adaptation; Shakespeare's *Macbeth* must have seemed an irresistible template for parodying the political circus and social conditions of the times. Garson's original intent was to write a brief satirical skit, which would be presented at the October 15-16 International Days of Protest, but within four months the piece became a full-length play (Garson ix-xi; Aarons E4).

After a 1966 interview with the playwright, *Washington Post* staff writer Leroy F. Aarons reported that Garson "was struck by the way present-day political realities fit the pattern of the Shakespeare tragedy" and "especially excited by what she considered to be the similarity of the moral issues: guilt and retribution, lust for power, the disparity between what is said and what is thought." Garson told Aarons, "Every day I woke up and read in the paper something that made it truer and truer" (qtd. in Aarons). "Since it

was just a few weeks after the Watts insurrection[2] and the Berkeley troop-train demonstrations,[3] the opening lines of a play suggested themselves immediately: 'When shall we three meet again / In riot, strike, or stopping train?'" (Garson ix).

In addition to parodying President Johnson (MacBird), the first lady (Lady MacBird), and John F. Kennedy (John Ken O'Dunc), Garson added other political targets to her satire, including Robert Kennedy, Teddy Kennedy, Chief Justice Earl Warren, Adlai Stevenson, Robert McNamara, and Wayne Morse. The playwright superimposed these political figures, along with social scenarios of the mid-Sixties, over the plot of *Macbeth* in a tale that follows Shakespeare's plotline fairly closely.

Three witches resembling radical activists of the Sixties show up at the Democratic convention and prophesy to MacBird that he will be President; MacBird is subsequently astonished when the Ken O'Dunc brothers choose him to be John Ken O'Dunc's running mate. Once in office, the MacBird couple conspires to assassinate the current leader, John Ken O'Dunc, when he visits them on their ranch. MacBird succeeds the assassinated John Ken O'Dunc as President and proceeds to escalate the "Viet Land" war. Other contemporary United States leaders, such as Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson (The Egg of Head) and Chief Justice Earl Warren (The Earl of Warren) are parodied in ensuing scenes as the Ken O'Duncs fret over MacBird's

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[2] On August 11, 1965, as a result of racial tension over California's (and other states') efforts to circumvent the new Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Watts neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles broke out in civilian rioting and police aggression that lasted for six days ("Huey P. Newton").

[3] Student protestors in the Vietnam Day Committee regularly organized public protests, which were conducted as Vietnam-bound troops rode chartered trains through the city's seldom-used railroad track to Oakland Army Base (Rorabaugh 93).

ascendency, and MacBird descends more and more deeply into his arrogance and self-deception. Lady MacBird goes insane, and when MacBird seeks counsel from the witches a second time, they prophesy his downfall. MacBird faces his political opponent and brother to the dead John Ken O'Dunc at the next Democratic convention. It is there that MacBird is suddenly gripped by a heart attack and dies. Garson's anti-Johnson *and* anti-Kennedy message is punctuated at the end of the play as Robert Ken O'Dunc, who has all along opposed MacBird, proclaims, "MacBird, our brilliant leader, lives no more" and, according to stage directions, exits in a processional with "Robert and MacBird banners wav[ing] side by side" (108-9).

Garson lifted lines verbatim from the original Shakespeare, or translated them into Standard English or American/Texan slang. The latter, always a humorous device in parodying Shakespeare, is particularly funny when the translated lines are familiar and flowery; for instance, whereas Macbeth's missive to Lady Macbeth regarding the Weird Sisters' first prophecy reads, "This I have thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing by being ignorant of what greatness is promis'd thee" (I.v.10-13), Macbird says, "I just wanted you to know right away, my dearest little pardner, what we have and what's been promised" (19).

Garson also borrowed language and scenes liberally from other Shakespeare plays, such as *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and especially *Hamlet*, from which she adapted the play-within-the-play in absurd combination with *Macbeth's* banquet scene; the result is a minstrel show commissioned by the Bobby Kennedy character and performed by the radical witches (a beatnik, a Black Muslim, and an old

leftist)[4] in order to "catch the conscience of the king" (*MacBird!* 91-4; *Hamlet* II.ii.605). Looking back on her writing process, Garson has said, "'I would just look for anything [applicable in Shakespeare]. I knew what I had to say, but if I could find a half a line or a line in which *he* said it,' that was preferable" (qtd. in Horwitz). For four months the play expanded as Garson continued to be inspired by the stranger-than-fiction daily news of the mid-Sixties, until the text became an unrelenting, cynical, and offensive bricolage of Shakespearean and 1960s images, language, characters, and figures that exposed the dark corners of racism, classism, greed, ambition, and power in Garson's world.

Caricature Illustrations by Lisa Lyons

Featured throughout the text, on handbills and letterheads, and on almost anything pertaining to *MacBird!* are illustrations by artist Lisa Lyons. These caricatures of LBJ, Lady Bird, the Kennedys, and other political figures are part and parcel of the text and set the satirical tone of Garson's play. Lyons cheerfully responded to an E-mail interview and sent pristine digital images of drawings she had done for *MacBird!* that never made it into the publication.

As cartoonist/graphic designer for the Independent Socialist Club in Berkeley, Lyons' work was well known to Garson, who asked for sketches to go with the play. Lyons recalls being delighted to get in on Garson's political project, recalling, "EVERYTHING was political! We all loved *MacBird*. It was so clever and outrageous."

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[4] "Old Left" refers to the pre-WWII radical movements, typically associated with labor unions and Communism. According to Rosen, ". . . small groups of intellectuals began in the late 1950s creating a "New Left," dedicated organizationally to avoiding the hierarchical, centralized leadership promoted by the Communist Party and ideologically to sustaining a democratic and egalitarian socialist movement" (95).

Like the entire project, Lyons' illustrations grew from "a quick casual sketch of MacBird running with the spear and shield for the $.50 edition of the play (!) to all the illustrations for the published version" (Lyons).

Oddly, the cover of the later Grove Press edition shows the spear-carrying MacBird with putrid green skin. Lyons is quick to clarify, and to express her disdain for the publisher:

> It was NOT my idea or Barbara's to colorize MacBird green as on the cover of the Grove Press edition, and I think on the album cover. Somebody's attempt to make it look psychedelic and less hard hitting, I suspect. I was annoyed with that, as I was with the fact that Grove left my name off the first edition. Barbara had to insist they add it to the second edition. A slimy bunch, and they didn't pay much either. And the print quality was also awful. The Dutch and Japanese editions were splendid, in contrast. The Grove Press first edition pages are now brown, and the Dutch edition pages are fine. (Lyons)

From the perspective of a feminist and Shakespearean, I am fascinated with Lyons' confession that she was influenced by society's sexist assumption that Lady Bird was an unpleasant person, as well as her own very personal reluctance to vilify President Johnson:

> I made Lady Bird pretty malevolent because at that time we thought she was probably like that. As it turned out, she seems to have been a nice person interested in wildflowers. I used her image in my strip for *It Ain't*

> *Me Babe*, the 1970 first women's liberation comic. She was the rich white socialite whose estate was taken over by a bunch of poor black women. No wild flowers there! In contrast, although we were opposed to LBJ's politics, I had a soft spot for him because he looked a lot like my father, so in all the pictures he comes across as being more silly than evil. (Lyons)

It is true that the one drawing of Lady MacBird in the Grove Press edition depicts her with a shifty expression as she hands a sharp spear to a contrastingly goofy-looking MacBird. Another, which appears in earlier editions, depicts her as a loony in the sleepwalking scene. Coincidentally, Lyons' remark about her unwillingness to depict LBJ as malevolent because he looked like her father is uncannily similar to Lady Macbeth's explanation for not murdering Duncan: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (*Macbeth* II.ii.12-13).

Lyons also took advantage of her artistic license with other images: "I made the three witches dancing around the caldron be Malcolm X, Jack Weinberg (the "man in the car" whose arrest began the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley, also a member of the ISC and a friend), and Barbara [Garson] herself. She was very cute. A little inside joke" (Lyons).

Lyons mused, "The era was a maelstrom of protest, reaction, conspiracy theories, deaths, struggle, grim determination and playful creativity, and MacBird captures all that."

Early Printing

In order to appreciate the importance of *MacBird!,* it is necessary to understand that era in which *MacBird!* arose—and the radical culture of which its author was a part. Of course, we all think we know the Sixties, as Susanne Shawyer has aptly noted: "Today the 1960s are familiar to those who never experienced the decade: children still dress as hippies on Halloween, and the model Twiggy, whose wide eyes peered from the covers of fashion magazines mid-decade, recently starred as a judge on several seasons of the hit television reality competition *America's Next Top Model*" (7). But to what extent are we able—even those of us who lived during the era—to transcend the nostalgia and revisit the paradoxical mixture of idealism and bitterness, or courage and fear that drove the Movement? The images Shawyer evokes appear quaint to us now; however, during the Sixties they signified deadly serious rebellion against authority and tradition; the mere sight of a man wearing long hair was enough to incite violence and pit generations against each other. As these pages re-visit the Sixties, I ask that my readers re-situate themselves, imagining a motley army of youthful rebels *with* a cause; the radical left did more than burst the boundaries of sex and drug use; they were also fighting a war against patriarchal oppression that had ruled in the United States since the nation's birth, and they were literally fighting to end a war—the Vietnam war—in which multitudes of their young, male peers were dying daily. Some, like Barbara Garson, fought that war through innovative publishing.

Garson, a self-proclaimed "libertarian socialist" and member of the radical group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was already a seasoned activist who, along with her husband, Marvin Garson, had been arrested on several occasions for distributing anti-Vietnam-war propaganda on military bases (Aarons). She was also a founding member of

The University of California at Berkeley's Free Speech Movement (FSM), the activist student organization that sparked Berkeley's legendary revolt in 1964 against the university administration, which had suddenly banned activists' proliferation of literature or solicitation of funds and support for their cause at card tables set up at the edge of campus (Rorabaugh 10). During her years as a student at Berkeley, Garson was always involved in radical activism, and she obviously understood the power of the press. In addition to putting on political puppet shows, speech-making, and participating in sit-ins (for which she was one of the 773 arrested at Sproul Hall), she co-founded the *Free Speech Movement Newsletter* (Aarons; Rorabaugh 24, 90).

In his biography of the noted sociologist Kingsley Davis, David Heer reports that while serving as a research assistant in 1962 for the IPUR (International and Popular Urban Research), Barbara Garson used the mimeograph machine to print leaflets that opposed American support of the South Vietnam government. Her employer, Davis, who founded the IPUR, disagreed hotly with Garson's stance and insisted "it was against the regulations of the University of California for any student to use University equipment for private purposes." He forbade such future abuses in the IPUR. Kingsley kept Garson on because she was such an excellent researcher, and Heer mentions Garson's authorship of *MacBird!* (56-7), but ironically never mentions—nor seems aware of—her use of University facilities to publish the first several thousands of copies of that play (Armstrong 91).

In a telephone interview, Garson said that she first published *MacBird!* just as she'd typed it on an IBM Selectric, under the name of Berkeley Free Press, which was

simply a printing press owned by Berkeley that Garson had acquired for the Free Speech Movement. The subsequent edition of the play was published using the same press and printing only 5,000 copies at a time.

Obstacles regarding publishing haunted the Garsons from start to end. While most publishers wanted nothing to do with the scandalous text (the *New Yorker* and many other publications refused even to sell advertisement for *MacBird!*) (Lyons), those who approved of it were clamoring. One particularly stressful episode for Barbara Garson was a dispute with Lawrence Fehrlinghetti, editor of *City Lights Journal* in San Francisco, who promised to publish excerpts of the play in his Fall 1966 issue. When the issue never materialized, the Garsons proceeded to self-publish, creating their own label, Grassy Knoll Press. Thus began a volley of letters between Ferlinghetti and the Garsons, which ran the gamut of accusations and counter-accusations, grievances regarding Fehrlighetti's eventual printing of the play, and demands for retractions and restitution. Barbara Garson's frustration is seen most clearly in an August 3, 1966 response to Fehrlinghetti's first confrontation:

> If I am a little harsh it is because your letter comes at the end of a series of phone calls and telegrams from publishers who all seem to have the same goal: To make sure that no one else gets MacBird to the public. They all want assurance of exclusive options and then they'll think about publishing it. Certainly none of them share my interest in getting a topical political message quickly to an audience. (4:41, City Lights Books Records)

At this, Ferlinghetti began circulating the rumor among booksellers that he had rights to the play and that Garson had double-crossed him. Both Barbara and Marvin Garson wrote him long, conscientious letters explaining their position. Apparently Ferlinghetti was amenable at times because in one undated letter to the publisher, Barbara Garson wrote, "Thank you for your reasonable letter, your cheerful postcard, and nicely printed copy of the City Lights Journal" and made a parenthetical joke about her husband's nominal role as publisher of the new Grassy Knoll Press: "Think how proud it makes my mother-in-law to know that her son is a corporation president at the age of 24" (4:41, City Lights Books Records). Despite the cordial attempts on the part of both parties, the dispute was never fully settled.

The Garsons persevered in their own publishing, and with the encouragement of astounding public response and sales, they soon sought a paperback publisher, but in addition to printers' general fear of involvement with a text of *MacBird!'s* subversive nature, few were willing to produce copies in such small quantities. So the Garsons moved to New York and found someone in the city who was "an old communist and happy to be part of it" (Garson 2 Jan. 2008).

In total, their own Grassy Knoll Press sold 105,000 copies of the play before they turned production and distribution over to Grove Press in late December of 1966 (4:41 City Lights Books Records). Grove, which sold 300,000 more copies (Armstrong 91), was a radical operation itself whose niche was "bring[ing] to national prominence the art and artists of the counterculture" ("Grove Press"). The script was hot, and Garson remembers Grove being suspicious that she and her husband were continuing to sell

copies even after signing the contract with Grove. To this day she adamantly denies the accusation (Telephone interview 2 Jan. 2008).

MacBird!'s Unprecedented Impact

The climate of the nation and the state of American theater were ideal for *MacBird!'s* debut. Before it was ever enacted on a stage, *MacBird!* had tremendous public impact as it not only pressed, but transgressed the boundaries of theater, and media in general. In his account of underground media activism of the Sixties, *A Trumpet to Arms*, David Armstrong notes Garson's self-publishing of *MacBird!* among events that jolted "received notions of propriety and political legitimacy" (91). Armstrong credits Garson's *MacBird!* script with delivering an initial punch that blackened the eye of conventional approaches to public critique of authority:

> Unlike the prevailing polite criticism o [sic] Johnson's war policies in liberal circles, MacBird depicted the president as a madman and an object of ridicule. By doing so, Garson violated the conventions of good taste and what was known at the time as "responsible dissent." Most of the underground media would soon follow her example. (91)

John Houchin's *Censorship of the American Theatre* sheds light on the state of theater during the play's emergence. He points to *MacBird!* as an igniting force in the radical theater movement of the Sixties, an era the author situates between the 1960 civil rights Woolworth sit-in and President Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974. Houchin offers a vivid review of the period, "beset by violence and demagoguery" which ironically "gave birth to a renewed sense of egalitarianism, pacifism, and hopefulness"

(173). Amid domestic and international upheaval, "a new generation of visionary directors, producers, and playwrights emerged" (173) from among the baby boomers who were witnessing daily the images of Cold War fiascoes, assassinations, riots, war, and a general disintegration of traditional American life. According to Houchin, the early Sixties were "generally free of theatrical controversy," and American playwrights whose work attacked hegemonic values were few and far between (184). By the time *MacBird!* was written, theater had only begun to be disrupted by the likes of anarchists Judith Malina and Julian Beck, whose direction of *The Connection* and *The Brig* blurred boundaries between fiction and reality, submerging the one within the other (181). Theirs and the plays of other artists that "contained even the slightest hint of sexual deviation, political revisionism, or religious contempt" were frequently and in many places censored and banned (183). Still, plays such as Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* and the San Francisco Mime Troupe's *A Minstrel Show* continued to push the envelope, using live theater as a means to challenge racism and fuel the Civil Rights Movement. Such productions, which transgressed widely accepted moral boundaries, drew public outrage and police intervention (184-90). Contemporary with *MacBird!*, Joseph Chaikin's direction of Jean-Claude van Itallie's *America Hurrah* "obliquely commented on the degenerative state of American society" and, like *MacBird!*, even included depictions of President Johnson, his daughter, and Vice-president Hubert Humphrey. *Hurrah* encountered "rigid opposition" from citizens, city governments, and churches in the locales where it played (192). But even Chaikin's bold piece did not compare to *MacBird!* in terms of confrontational theater:

> The political commentary of *America Hurrah,* while present, was nonetheless circuitous and indirect. It did not point fingers and name names. Not so with *MacBird!*. . .[which] touched a nerve. What were the limits of art? Of freedom of expression? Were there certain topics that artists could not visit? Were dramatic texts affidavits attesting to the moral or political beliefs of the playwright? Was theatre bound by some type of moral imperative to "tell the truth"? Or was theatre a fictive domain to be judged by its own discrete rules? (Houchin 192-3)

Robert Brustein recognized this impact *MacBird!* had on theater from the time it first surfaced as a script to be read at protest rallies, and continued for decades to refer to the play as a landmark in radical, politically driven theater. In his collection of essays on theater of the Sixties, *The Culture Watch*, Brustein recalls the early days of the play's history, when it was circulated "as an underground pamphlet, sold under the counter at bookstores, and read aloud at protest rallies and antiwar meetings." He writes, "I myself gave portions of the play their first New York hearing during a teach-in at Columbia in 1966" (36). Brustein adds,

> [*MacBird!*] proved a liberating event for American theatre, as *Dr. Strangelove* had been for the American film, Lenny Bruce for American comedy, and *Catch-22* for American literature. For all its malice and extremism, despite the fact that it probably embodied and inspired considerable irresponsibility, *MacBird* made it possible for the performing

> arts to use those freedoms guaranteed by but rarely exercised under the Bill of Rights. (36-7)

Throughout its several iterations, from a manuscript hammered out on a typewriter to a professional publication, the play yielded almost half a million copies sold. Bill Henderson lists *MacBird!* among the most successful independent ventures in his essay on the history of independent publishing (104).

MacBird!: First Published JFK Conspiracy Theory

It turns out that *MacBird!* was unprecedented in many ways, one of which has remained undiscovered until now: Garson's play was the very first published document that implicated LBJ in the assassination of JFK. In a 2004 article about JFK assassination conspiracy theories, entitled, "Shame on the History Channel," journalist Max Holland explains that the first references to Johnson's role in the assassination "occurred in the cultural sphere; it was too unspeakable an insinuation to make elsewhere" (par. 6). Holland refers to *MacBird!* as foremost among fictional works that "pointed to Johnson as being responsible for the assassination" (par. 6), and after the play became famous, "In fairly short order books and articles presuming to be non-fiction started leveling the same claim" (par. 6). But Holland erroneously credits Penn Jones, the editor of a small-town newspaper in Texas, as having been the very first to print allegations that Johnson was involved (par. 3). Holland refers to Jones' *Forgive My Grief*, which was published in May 1966, and Holland mistakenly cites *MacBird!* as being "fashioned" in 1966 (par. 3).

In truth, Garson was reading excerpts of the play in public on the UC Berkeley campus by winter 1965, and the published play was sold for the first time on March 25,

1966, when U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, spoke at the Greek Stadium to receive an honorary degree from UC Berkeley. Goldberg's acceptance speech defended the Johnson administration's Vietnam policies, and the crowd of about 14,000 was armed with anti-war placards bearing slogans such as "Arthur Goldberg, Doctor of War" ("March 25, 1966"). By spring of 1966, the Independent Socialist Club of Berkeley had printed and sold out an edition of 2,000 copies (Garson x). So among its many distinctions, *MacBird!* predates other sources that had the audacity to allude in print to the unspeakable possibility.

Ironically, Garson never believed Johnson was involved or in any way to blame for Kennedy's death. Unlike true conspiracy theorists, Garson included the assassination plot in her play as an artistic choice, "only to keep the parody as faithful as possible to the original, . . . her basic aim [being to] expose the hypocrisy of the Nation's political leaders, not to imply involvement of President Johnson in the Kennedy tragedy" (Aarons). When I told Garson of my discovery that *MacBird!* held this distinction, she was surprised to learn that she had been the first to publish the idea. She said that the notion had always been there "in the air," ever since the assassination, but noted that once *MacBird!* scripts were selling, people often called her to say they were on her side about the conspiracy (Personal interview 18 Oct. 2008).

In spite of her repeated insistence to the contrary, the notion of Garson as a conspiracy theorist does not die easily. In a recent interview, she recalled that in 1992, in his review of Oliver Stone's *JFK*, critic John Leo mistook *MacBird!* as the source of a familiar and obscene controversial image that circulated in the Sixties: "LBJ fucking

JFK's neck wound . . . [which] allegedly took place on Air Force One right after the Kennedy assassination" (Vale; Garson, Personal interview 18 Oct. 2008).

The depiction actually appeared in the May 1967 issue of *The Realist*, a highly satirical and controversial magazine, which was legendary for printing a centerfold spread showing all the familiar Disney characters engaging in a sex orgy. Oddly, Bolerium Book's blurb on Issue 74 of *The Realist*, now a valuable collector's item, explains that the magazine's editor, Paul Krassner, adopted the LBJ/JFK image from Barbara Garson's husband, Marvin, positing, "his openness of mind perhaps effected [sic] by marriage to Barbara Garson, who had already published the accusatory 'MacBird'" (Bolerium). Krassner also now confirms that the idea came from Marvin Garson (Vale par. 13). The confusion is therefore understandable, since Marvin Garson held the official title of publisher of Grassy Knoll Press (4:41, City Lights Books Records).

From California to the New York Island

MacBird!'s popularity as a mere script in California prompted Barbara Garson to contact the only theater person she knew in New York, Roy Levine, an old friend who was a stage designer. Levine was immediately enthusiastic about the play and wanted to produce it. Levine's girlfriend was working at Jason Epstein Publishing at the time and showed *MacBird!* to the people there. They liked it and were willing to put it in *The New York Review of Books* under the condition that the author change the text so that it didn't look like Johnson killed Kennedy. Garson says that she refused to do so, and she and Levine went ahead with production plans. (Telephone interview 11 Feb. 2008).

Once the script was circulating in New York, *The New York Review of Books* did cover it after all, conspiracy plot still intact, with Dwight MacDonald calling *MacBird!* "The funniest, toughest-minded, and most ingenious political satire [he'd] read in years." The article, which was printed December 1, 1966, long before the play opened off-Broadway, was bursting with admiration for the young playwright, whom, he proclaims, "has plenty to say about our Establishment, all of it uncomplimentary, and she says it in a headlong style, full of verve and humor—a kind of genial ferocity." MacDonald takes it upon himself to exonerate Garson of any serious link to conspiracy theory by stating,

> An author who would build a satire around such an insinuation, for which no shred of evidence exists save in the addled wits of crackbrains, couldn't possibly have written anything as funny as *MacBird*, humor being incompatible with solipsistic fanaticism. Nor would such a writer be endowed with the sense of reality Miss Garson shows in her adaptation of the Shakespearian material, the joke always depending on deftly using the familiar old lines to comment on the actual current situation.

It is curious, and from a feminist perspective unsettling and frustrating, that MacDonald undercuts his otherwise glowing praise intermittently with comparisons such as, "But if Miss Garson rises, she also sinks. As Shakespearian pastiche, her play is technically much inferior to Max Beerbohm's parody of the Elizabethan manner in *Savonarola Brown* and to Nigel Dennis's extraordinary and sustained imitation, almost as long as *MacBird*, in *Cards of Identity*," and "It would have been better, of course, if Miss Garson had managed to combine the literary finesse of Beerbohm and Dennis with her all-out

attack on the accepted political fundaments, as Brecht was able to do, but one really can't demand genius." It seems that, having put her in her place, beneath the three famous male satirists, MacDonald is then at liberty to expound upon the satirical *genius* of Garson's broad-hitting style, which the critic acknowledges is *pitch-perfect,* given the situation:

> The impeccable bad taste that pervades *MacBird* may be just what the subject calls for, precisely the approach most congruent to the atmosphere of Washington under the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson, and to his political style. The rapier would have been not only inadequate but also irrelevant. An enthusiastic laying about with the broad-axe was needed and this Miss Garson has provided . . . I suggest the stylistic crudities may be inextricably intertwined with the special charm of *MacBird*, which is the freedom with which the Elizabethan rhetoric is roughed up for comic or satiric effect, the Bard being treated as irreverently as the President. Nothing sacred . . . and she has solved, in her own slam-bang way, the problem of satirizing a reality so grotesque that it often seems to defy exaggeration, producing its own built-in parody, so to speak. The reek of Johnsonian politics perhaps is better suggested by such passages as these than it would have been by more polished verse.

MacDonald includes several textual examples in support of his qualified stance that Garson's hard-hitting satire more aptly depicts Johnson than perhaps Brecht, Dennis, or Beerbohm might have managed. Paradoxically, MacDonald certainly promoted Garson and *MacBird!*, but he also compromised her potential to be recognized as a

brilliant satirist by dubbing her work "technically much inferior" to predecessors who wrote for different purposes and in different situations, and by decreeing the playwright less than genius. This kind of qualified, begrudging praise continued to follow Garson and *MacBird!*, in spite of the play's tidal-wave success and widespread acknowledgment of its enjoyability as both a text and a performed play, as well as its aptness as a political critique. This tempering from the beginning may have contributed to its exclusion from the radical canon.

Nonetheless, *Washington Post* staff writer Leroy F. Aarons credited the MacDonald review among reasons for *MacBird!'s* fame:

> "Macbird's" phenomenal success is due partly to the current fashion for anti-Administration tracts (a second play, "Viet Rock," is running off-Broadway and a third is in the works) and partly to favorable articles by Robert Brustein, an eminent theater critic and dean of Yale Drama School, in the New York Times Magazine and Jack Newfield in the Village Voice. But "Macbird" stands on its own as an ingenious marriage of Elizabethan stylisms and topical satire. ("Satiric Stab")

To this day, Garson herself attributes much of her success in self-publishing to an opportunistic move she made at that time in response to MacDonald's review: she placed a small ad alongside the article, offering the published play for a dollar. The dollars came through the mail, one at a time. This marketing of the book alongside the positive review marked the first big boost of sales outside California. In a telephone interview, Garson mused, "The coupling of the ad with the play is how I became a big publisher—for a

short while." Garson said that when "all of this" started, she didn't know the rules. She would get an idea, see an opportunity, and then plunge ahead (11 Feb. 2008). Her innocent impulses were not without sound and fury, however, and *MacBird!* would soon become a household word—a bad word. As *Time* magazine phrased it, because of its shocking content, "MacBird! by Barbara Garson [was] awaited with all the fierce anticipatory noises surrounding a tumbrel arriving at the guillotine" ("Mangy Terrier"). Thinking back, Garson says she was surprised by the commotion; at the time she wrote and presented *MacBird!* to the world, she was under the impression that it was fine to do political parody, having seen it in cartoons and lampoons plenty of times. "It was okay to do big noses, costumes, blustery characters; I didn't realize it was such a big deal" (Telephone interview 11 Feb. 2008).

But *MacBird!* was a big deal, especially in New York, and one of the first public throw-downs occurred over MacDonald's *New York Review* piece. A self-proclaimed "radical" graduate student, Stephen Newman of Rutgers University, wrote a letter accusing MacDonald of sounding "quite concerned . . . that people might take Mrs. Garson's implications seriously." MacDonald took Newman's attack, if not the play, quite seriously and in retaliation launched a full-salvo counter-attack against the younger man, with both sides battling on the pages of the *New York Review* and drawing attention to themselves as well as the play. The sides were drawn along generational lines, which is not surprising given the under- and over-thirty binary that permeated the era's discourse regarding political and social issues. Newman's letter accused MacDonald of a tactic often used by traditionalists who wanted to downplay radical acts: paying lip service to

MacBird! by embracing it on the one hand, yet discrediting Garson's radical issues on the other. He wrote, "You have not omitted the most provocative points in Barbara Garson's MacBird, you have merely told us that they 'shouldn't be taken seriously, for goodness sake'" (Newman). MacDonald, interpreting Newman's reference to "the most provocative points" to mean the assassination plot, published Newman's rant alongside a retaliatory diatribe that dismissed Newman in terms of age, experience, and politics; he capped his retort by quoting from a letter of thanks he, MacDonald, had received from the supreme authority in this case, Barbara Garson herself:

> "You caught perfectly the relationship between me and the Macbeth plot. It's quite true that I said Johnson killed Kennedy because of the [*Macbeth*] plot. I have no proof and no reason to believe it. In fact I never thought seriously of the possibility while writing the play . . . . I'm just the opposite of the people who had the idea seriously but couldn't bear to live with the thought. I couldn't seriously believe it but it was fun to play with it anyway. You got just this spirit in your article by saying 'how onerous she found this necessity [of sticking with Shakespeare's plot] I don't know.'" (qt'd in Newman)

The public controversy touched off emotional fireworks in the press weeks before the play actually premiered in January 1967. The hype around *MacBird!* had built to absurd levels, according to *Monocle* magazine's editor, Victor S. Navasky. His humorous article, which appeared in the *New York Times* on December 18, 1966, took a tongue-in-cheek approach to *MacBird!'s* upcoming off-Broadway debut from the perspective of a

potential investor in the show. Navasky feigned hope in the show's success, recognizing "the advantage in a team which was ignorant of off-Broadway's money-losing ways," knowing "they had not yet mastered the secret of how to squander other people's money." He wrote,

> Neither of the co-producers, David Dretzin, who is an attorney, and Julia Curtis, a former editorial aide at Random House, had ever produced a play before; Mrs. Garson, a graduate student in her mid-twenties, had never written a play before; and the young director, Roy Levine . . . had never directed an off-Broadway play before (or one on Broadway either, for that matter), having been trained as a scenic designer. (X7)

Navasky lampooned the New York theater scene, describing a meeting he attended for potential *MacBird!* investors, where bits of the script were read aloud, and arguments ensued about the producibility of the seditious, tasteless material. Among the crowd was "Joseph Papp, the founder of Shakespeare in the Park, [who] rose and announced his opinion that the American theater is dying if not dead, and that 'MacBird' was the best hope of bringing the theater back to life. He said it was of vital importance that this play, which he termed 'brilliant,' be produced" (X7). Referring to the flurry of reviews that preceded *MacBird!'s* opening, Navasky realized: "all of New York seemed to be making up its mind about 'MacBird' before it was produced—The Times, Time, The New York Review, The New Yorker, The Village Voice. If I didn't hurry, there would be no one left to review it by the time it opened" (X7).

Literary Merit

Before departing from the topic of Garson's written text, it is important to address the controversial issue of so-called literary merit as concerns this play. It seems that in its day, most who loved the play for its value as a political tool also appreciated Garson's prowess as a satirist, poet, and playwright; those who disapproved of its seditious content dismissed the text as sophomoric fluff. Among the former, although his praise of Garson's talent waffled a bit, Dwight MacDonald wrote, "So much dignified cant has overlaid the reality of our current Establishment politics that it is refreshing to have it brushed aside by a ruthless, if over-exuberant, housekeeper . . . at last the younger generation has produced a satirist" ("Birds"). Among the latter, Walter Kerr took offense and defended the characters of John F. Kennedy and others parodied in the play, whom he deemed respectable. He wrote, "The author is casting about in the dark, her revolver going off repeatedly and in all directions, unaware of what she is hitting or whether she is actually hitting anything at all. The invention is irresponsible in a poetic sense; it doesn't scan" ("Theater").

It is difficult to make an objective case for the literary merit of this or any piece, the concept of the canon being complex and subject to various factors, including disciplinary context. In the light of Garson's being a female playwright and more liable to be marginalized or excluded from the anthologies of twentieth-century theater (I do draw comparisons between her adaptation of *Macbeth* and those of her male contemporaries in a later chapter), I argue for the many merits of *MacBird!* as a historic and literary dramatic text and assert that it is worthy of attention and possesses lasting value.

If the credentials of those who have lauded *MacBird!* count for anything, it is a wonder that the text remains in dusty corners of used book stores and has yet to be published in anthologies and textbooks. In addition to Robert Brustein, who has heaped praise upon Garson's play since it was first circulating as an underground leaflet, *MacBird!* was, in its time, condoned and promoted by many of the biggest names in theater, including Peter Brook, Martin Esslin, Luis Valdez, Toby Cole, Augusto Boal, Charles Marowitz, Joan Littlewood, and Joseph Papp, among others.

Peter Brook, co-director of the Royal Shakespeare Company at the time of the play's opening, published various versions of his lengthy critique of high praise for Garson's work in major newspapers. In his rebuttal of the snobbishly bashing reviews that dubbed the play crude and vulgar or collegiate and adolescent, Brook wrote,

> It was such a huge success at its previews that the producers postponed the official opening for four weeks, toying with the idea of never inviting the press at all. Then on Wednesday, Feb. 22, they rashly took the plunge and were rewarded by the predictable cries of "embarrassing," "boorish," "gratuitously nasty," "crackpot." Walter Kerr in the New York Times hurls in as the crowning insult the term "desperate vaudeville." But were I the author, I would take this as a great compliment. ("'MacBird' Lets Fly")

Brook believed Garson's language to be "deliberately simplified" and proclaimed *MacBird!* "exuberant, intensive"; and, "in their context, the words take on a biting edge"

(D1). On the topic of literary merit, Brook compared Garson's play to Brecht's *Arturo Ui*:

> Her objective is precise, it is the entire Washington establishment, the entire structure of ruling that she wishes to hold up to the light. The fact that the material is flimsy, the idiom pulp, the expectation of literary immortality nil, is a source of strength, and one must face the point that, from most points of view, this is a more considerable event than Brecht's "Arturo Ui," which is theoretically a more lasting play [and yet] has failed to find an audience in New York. ("Is 'MacBird' Pro-American?" D3)

Brook referred to a comment he overheard an audience member say at the Village Gate: "'If this weren't about Johnson and Kennedy, it just wouldn't stand up at all.'" Brook's response was, "Unfortunately, literary theater has conditioned itself sick, and people are lost in front of an event that sets up other references." He added, "For me, 'MacBird' is one of the most interesting and enjoyable performances I have seen in New York for many years. I say this very soberly, because I believe this is an event which opens a long series of vital questions" ("Is 'MacBird' Pro-American?" D3). Brook's lengthy interrogation, prompted by the controversy over *MacBird!'s* merit as a literary or theatrical piece, featured the same sorts of questions that are still asked today in performance studies:

> When [*MacBird!*] is condemned, it is condemned against another, "better" theater. What is this theater? What is meant by serious theater? People accept the concept, that, for theater to be serious, it should deal with what

> concerns its audience most. What concerns us? What are our themes? What is urgent? What is immediacy? Then, what form does seriousness take? Have the terms "well documented," "investigation in depth," "fair approach" anything to do with theater? Is it a true standard to expect the theater to say something? If so, how? Through rational statements, conclusions, solutions? Or is there another way? Is it a true standard to expect an act of theater to "do" something? What does satire "do?" Can an act of theater topple a government? Or end a war? If not, has it failed? ("Is 'MacBird' Pro-American?" D3)

As he persists with still more questions, "Does literary theater exclude non-literary theater and vice versa? What is the role of entertainment? Does pleasure let us off the hook or does fun vivify us? Are purpose and solemnity inseparable? Is irreverence childish? Are tragedy and farce opposites?" Brook reiterates the seriousness of his interrogation: "These are not rhetorical questions. They are difficult ones and need to be explored with care." His defense of Garson and *MacBird!* takes an ever-deeper look at the question of a work of art's worth, reminding his readers that "It is said that critics try to judge each event by its own standards, so that, without inconsistency, they can praise a good conventional comedy and damn an imperfect but ambitious drama. 'MacBird' then can only be judged in its own context of political protest" ("Is 'MacBird' Pro-American?" D3).

Walter Kerr, renowned critic and prime antagonist of *MacBird!* and Garson, wrote an article in response to "a good bit of mail that has come in on 'MacBird!,'

particularly the mail that takes me sharply to task for suggesting that, however out of control some of our emotions may actually be at the moment, the organization of those emotions into a 'play' ought itself to be controlled." Here, although Kerr prefaced one supporting anecdote with, "All men have surely known the mood at one time or another," he gender-shifted to the following story of a woman's loss of emotional control:

> I once watched a woman—my wife, as it happens—leap in fury at a garden she'd very carefully planted and tended months before and rip from the ground every shred of remaining vegetation. The children, who were small, had been idly pulling up the flowers one at a time. Better to wipe out the intention and the hope entirely, in one wild swoop, than to watch it vanish inch by inch, daily, before still yearning eyes. The urge is familiar. ("To Act" X1)

Kerr's analogy, coupled with an earlier review, in which he says of Garson, "We are involved with a woman who seems to have started talking and couldn't be stopped because the talk just kept coming out" ("Theater: MacBird!") promotes the traditionally misogynist notion that women, his own wife[5] and Garson included, lack self control.

Additionally, Kerr's analogy is faulty, since the United States government and the Vietnam War during the Sixties—both Garson's primary targets—can hardly be compared to a garden wherein innocent children are picking flowers. Furthermore, the

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[5] Kerr's wife, Jean Kerr, was herself a successful author and playwright. In a discussion of Kerr's anecdote, Professor James Loehlin noted, "Kerr may have been alluding to (and promoting?) her 1957 *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*," a bestselling collection of essays, which became a movie in 1960 and ran as a TV sit-com on NBC from 1965-1967 (Berkvist).

wife/mother who plants the garden, and then attacks it because her own children have begun to ruin it are in no way analogous to Garson and those of her ilk who lash out in desperation at an aggressive, patriarchal government, which they have in no way created. It is impossible to make any logical link between Kerr's example of the irrational woman wiping out hope and Garson attacking the U.S. political system via her play; whether inadvertently or intentionally, Kerr's sexist references to women as blathering and irrational cloud his argument, as well as his credibility.

Kerr was not the only critic who dismissed the play as "collegiate," but he led the pack among those who failed to see the humor in Garson's full-on and indiscriminate satirical attack. Among other negative reviews is one from *Time Magazine*, denigrating *MacBird!* as a "mangy little terrier of a satire, nipping at the trouser cuffs of the mighty. Its bark is its bite. Holier than thou in its complacency and self-indulgently assured of how In-funny it is, MacBird is an off-campus transplant of college humor." *Time* also derided the "honor guard of coterie intellectuals, including critic Dwight MacDonald and Yale Drama School Dean Robert Brustein, [who] went into tub-thumping ecstasy over MacBird" ("Mangy Terrier").

In his 2001 article, "*MacBird!* and *Macbeth*: Topicality and Imitation in Barbara Garson's Satirical Pastiche," Tom Blackburn discusses *MacBird!* in the context of "afterfacts," a term he coins to refer to the afterlives of literary works that are reproduced into some artifact, whether it be in text, graphic, or cinematic form. Blackburn posits that there are two kinds of afterfacts: those that attempt to represent faithfully the original,

and which we use to "extend and enhance the varieties of interpretive approaches brought to bear on our own readings of the plays" (137), and those that

> [lead] us to enhance or revise how we read the original. The afterfact itself may be judged to possess intrinsic merit, either from a dramatic or literary perspective, or as a particularly witty, accurate or effective commentary on its own times . . . [and] may at once reveal to us something about the historical particularity of the political, cultural or moral climates in which both the original and the afterfact were produced. (137)

Blackburn argues that *MacBird!* is exemplary of the second type of afterfact, and that teachers, scholars, and critics ought to pay attention to it. His overall assessment is that *MacBird!* should, on the basis of its resonances with the original *Macbeth,* "endure, at least peripherally, in Shakespeare studies" (143-4). "As an afterfact of *Macbeth* with a brief but bright life of its own," he continues, "*MacBird!* earns a place in the history of the 1960s not for the accuracy of its political projections, nor for its literary quality, but as a striking record of the mood and tenor of the protest culture of the times" (144). Blackburn argues in his essay that *MacBird!* provides that "striking record" of the Sixties protest zeitgeist (and in a later chapter, I provide a deep contextual analysis showing that this is so from a feminist viewpoint), and shows that *MacBird!* resonates with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It is encouraging that Blackburn has pulled *MacBird!* from the recesses of its semi-erasure and nominated it for inclusion in the dramatic canon.

I am determined to take Blackburn's argument further and to counter his estimation of *MacBird!'s* literary worth. Having steeped my attention in the play and all

that has been written about it, I have come to question why Blackburn, or any of the critics who have taken the position before him, qualify their praise of *MacBird!* with censure of its worth as a literary text. The play is topical, yes, and Blackburn addresses this fact as the "one difficulty that relegates it to the category of ephemera occupied by most topical satires" (144), since, unlike Shakespeare, who wrote *Macbeth* with centuries of historic hindsight, Garson wrote *MacBird!* without benefit of knowledge that Johnson would retire or that Robert Kennedy would be assassinated. But the play is not mere silliness, a basis upon which some have dismissed it. It is rather, as Jack Newfield of the *Village Voice* notes, "of Swiftian dimensions" (Garson *MacBird!*), and no less absurd in its outlandish depictions of the state of a nation than is Jonathan Swift's in *Gulliver's Travels*, which is similarly indiscriminate in its scope, and in which heads of state are depicted cartoonishly, nor is its intent any less "deadly serious," as Peter Brook asserts ("Is 'MacBird' Pro-American?" D1).

Peter Brook's articulate critique of *MacBird!* in yet another article provides a compelling vision of the play. He begins by describing a bad dream he had, in which he "unscrewed an American head and peered inside" to find "an American city . . . with its monolithic buildings, its canyon-like avenues, its intersecting streets, the dense block of traffic creeping up and down," a city where "ideas turn sharp left, sharp right or continue in a straight line, never making U-turns, never taking curves, never darting down alleys, never taking short-cuts." Brook contrasts this dream, which paints the American brain as "unimaginative and unquestioning of authority" with *MacBird!,* a play through which he sees "another America, the quick-witted America, that is fighting this [Vietnam] war with

the flash of thought," and a play in which "the Nation's leaders are represented as victims of a power network which they believe they dominate but by which they are each destroyed, and the elected president of the Nation is shown to his voters as an assassin" ("MacBird! Let's Fly" F1). Brook's glowing review provides some access to the excitement and unprecedentedness of a play that overturned the dusty, entrenched establishmentarianism that was only beginning to erode:

> A sense of courage provides the energy that makes the show explode with theatricality. It is exuberant, inventive and in their context the words are not at all facetious. They take on a biting edge. The Egg of Head, or Adlai Stevenson, tortures himself with the question, "To see or not to see"; the Earl of Warren, white-haired and stubborn, refuses to compromise but lets himself be persuaded; the noble Wayne of Morse charges quixotically behind an unwieldy lance; the Burning Wood comes to destroy MacBird as the Negroes set fire to the avenues of Washington—event by event the parallels make icy sense. ("'MacBird!' Lets Fly" F1)

Of Garson's method, Brook acknowledges the play's simplicity, which he asserts is intentional. In fact, Brook was right, and this became clear to me during a telephone interview in which Garson recalled seeing Richard Schechner's 1972 production of Sam Shepard's *Tooth of Crime*. She said the play had people getting up and moving around, and at some point she bumped into a man who was re-adjusting a piece of the cumbersome set. She uttered a complaint to him about the discomfort for the audience, but she told him she was enjoying it nonetheless. The man thanked her, and she realized

it was Schechner. This is a poignant anecdote since Schechner probably had no idea he was speaking to the author of *MacBird!*, whose radical *Macbeth* adaptation preceded and no doubt influenced his own 1969 *Makbeth After Shakespeare*. Garson's commentary on the chance meeting also reveals a striking difference between Garson and Schechner. She feels that Schechner's experimental methods alienate audiences and elevate the artist in "something akin to Bob Dylan saying, 'Because something is happening here / But you don't know what it is / Do you, Mister Jones?'" Garson, on the other hand, says she did all she could to make her play accessible, regardless of whether it "sounded old fashioned." She posits,

> One thing that separates me [from Schechner], and it's because I'm a political activist, is I had no intention of making the time in the theater unpleasant. If they came to the play, it would be a Shakespeare adaptation that would not require the audience to strain to understand. I am not, myself, extremely experimental. I am not stylistically trying to make them struggle. (Telephone interview 2 Jan. 2008)

Peter Brook's defense of *MacBird!'s* simplicity continues as he states, "her idiom is a Pop art in which every element is potential scrap; here a number of traditions meet—that of the great Shakespeare, that of 'Ubu Roi' whose author Jarry was also called puerile in his time" ("Is 'MacBird' Pro-American?" D1). It may be that, having passed its topical context by four decades, and U.S. history having now seen repetition of themes in Garson's play (unpopular war, arrogant and aggressive foreign policy, overbearing leaders, etc.) that receded for a time and have now circled through again, *MacBird!*

deserves another look. Is it not the repetition of the same social ills again and again, and similarly repeated human and cultural response to those conditions, that raise recognition and resonant feeling that, traditionally, we have dubbed "universal" in such classic works that, like Swift's, were originally topical?

In my own argument, I could hardly outdo Peter Brook's lengthy and eloquent articulation of *MacBird!'s* worth as a protest piece; nor Martin Esselin's passionate adoration of the play's artistic worth (see section on London Production); nor Robert Brustein's insistence of its crucial significance in American theater (*Third Theatre* xii; *Culture Watch* 36, 62); nor Joseph Papp's passionate insistence before investors in 1966 that the play must be produced (Navasky X7). Instead, I will move to the words and work of a current-day teacher and director who has taught and produced *MacBird!*, and whose deep consideration of the text, its performability, and its cogence for modern-day students and theater audiences proves it viable and elastic.

In the program notes for his Washington International School students' 2004 production of *MacBird!*, Jim Zidar recalls picking up a copy of the play in a used book store several years ago, assuming it was "another dated political 'satire' of the toothless wink-nudge sort," but he found it actually to be "darkly, savagely comic but thrillingly poignant." He describes his astonishment at his students' enthusiasm when presented with the play:

> What surprised me most was that the youngest, while not "getting" many of the play's references, quickly grasped the spirit of the play, thinking it a recent creation about a Texas president who gains office by dubious

> means, uses alarmist rhetoric and outright lies to wage an increasingly unpopular war, which he then uses as an excuse to solidify his power by ever more ruthless means. Several students said they were enthralled by the idea of "stuffy classical literature" turned to illuminate today's world. What a concept! ("Director's Notes")

Since so much of what is considered "canonical" has to do with timeless themes and usefulness in educational settings, Zidar's experience with *MacBird!* pleads a strong case for the play's relevance as an important piece of dramatic literature.

Garson surprised Zidar and his students by showing up at their production of *MacBird!.* She was touched by the performance and impressed that the high school production was the best she'd seen since the play's heyday in the Sixties. This is because productions that have been staged since *MacBird!* closed in 1968 have tended to be handled farcically and have generally gotten terrible reviews. A recent example is the American Century Theatre's 2006 production in Washington, D.C., which horrified Garson with its incessant sight gags that interrupted the all-important iambic beat (Personal interview 18 Oct. 2008), and about which *The Washington Post's* Peter Marks wrote, "Under Ellen Dempsey's rudimentary direction, actors of divergent skill levels execute a lot of double takes and generally ham it up, in ways that often give off the ripe aromas of high school drama club." Marks' additional comment that "The numbing regularity of the presidential skits on 'Saturday Night Live' long ago drained audiences of the ability to be convulsed by this sort of satire," presumes that *MacBird!* is too passé

for today's audiences, but it also points up the tremendous influence Garson's satire had on the harsh style and freedom with which our culture now criticizes its leaders.

Jim Zidar and his students' success with the play prompted Garson to select him as director for her recent Brecht Forum reading of the play. Zidar explained to me his understanding of *MacBird!* and his approach to it:

> [Garson's] choice of Macbeth as a framework, with its story of a well-meaning public servant corrupted by the very realization of his ambitions, told me that she'd envisioned not cartoons, but complex characters with inner conflicts. Accordingly I decided to treat the play as high Shakespearean tragedy, and took note of themes in the other Shakespeare plays she'd referenced, like the tyranny of populism in Julius Caesar and the revenge exacted by the freakish former outcast in Richard III as his power rises. More of Barbara's mockery seemed directed at American culture than at the characters: Air Wick, the "Pox Americana," and this line that gave me goose bumps the first time I read it:
>
> Black men beat and burnt and shot,
>
> Bake within our melting pot. (E-mail 29 Nov. 2008)

The DVD recording of Zidar's production shows it to be minimal in terms of movement and tech, and lends itself more to the language than to extraneous sight gags. Staging is simple and straightforward, with the actors costumed in Sixties-period style rather than the parodic jumble of cowboy boots, kilts, and Elizabethan garb suggested by

Lisa Lyons' illustrations and employed in the off-Broadway production. Having directed many a high school, college, and community-based theater Shakespeare play, I watch the video-recorded production of Zidar's students, and am taken with the way the language and situations of *MacBird!* "gallop apace" on stage, as they do in Garson's text. This conclusion, that the text translates well to the stage, has been confirmed for me, not only in the aforementioned Brecht Forum staged reading in New York, but also in an informal, cold reading on September 18, 2008 in Austin, Texas with the Weird Sisters Women's Theater Collective. If it is played or read without unnecessary pauses, according to Elizabethan style, *MacBird!'s* iambic rhythm moves the plot seamlessly and with a compelling pace, much like a blank-verse Shakespearean comedy.

What is *MacBird!'s* merit, then, and who is to judge? In a 1967 essay entitled, "No More Masterpieces," Robert Brustein echoes the era's general longing for "no more piety, no more reverence, no more sanctimoniousness in the theatre" as he proposes "treating the theatre as informally as a circus tent, a music hall, a prize ring—a place in which the spectator participates rather than worships, and offers the stage something more than the condescension of applause" (*Third Theatre* 34). *MacBird!* was a poetically resonant and politically radical blockbuster of a play, which answered that Sixties call for an anti-classics aesthetic.

It is necessary, finally, to acknowledge terms such as "the canon" and "literary merit" as problematic, bearing in mind critic Jill Dolan's comment in the context of assigning women's work to either a new, feminist canon or to the traditional and dominant male canon: "Canons, by implication, exclude not only worthy plays but

worthy spectators on the basis of their ideological perspectives" (40). The sense of Dolan's logic as it pertains to Garson's play is that some nebulous and patriarchal authoritative voice has, over time, exerted pressure against a tremendous body of "worthy spectators." While there can be no final verdict on *MacBird!'s* ability to be revived frequently or successfully on stage over time, there is more than ample evidence that Barbara Garson's text, which sold half a million copies in the public sphere, became the basis for countless productions in the U.S. and abroad, was lauded by many of the most renowned experimental theater practitioners in the world, and can still be appreciated today by teenagers in a high school classroom is worthy of a secure place in the anthologies and chronicles of dramatic literature.

The White House

A syndicated "Berry's World" cartoon from 1967's award-winning cartoonist, Jim Berry (AAEC), aptly depicts a rotund and rumpled, cigar-smoking Grove Press agent sitting at a cluttered desk. The figure of Lyndon Johnson is stalking out the door, past a miffed-looking figure of William Shakespeare, who stands waiting. The caption below reads, "Okay, buddy, now what's YOUR complaint about 'MacBird'?"

Indeed, Grove Press and all of those involved with *MacBird!* felt the heat of opposition. Even before the play opened, the Oval Office itself was receiving mail from around the country decrying *MacBird!* as indecent, seditious, and slanderous and calling for action against it. Mr. E. A. Heppner of Heppner Manufacturing in Round Lake, Illinois wrote to the White House on February 8, 1967, decrying the play as "the most outrageous spectacle that has ever been witnessed by the American public," reassuring

the President that "if you are seething with righteous indignation remember that the overwhelming majority of citizens are just as mad as you are about this play," and admonishing Johnson to "use your rank. Shut this play down by Presidential Order. The insignificant 'Pinks' and 'punks' will howl when you do this, but decent people all over the world will be cheering for you." Assistant to the President, Paul Popple, replied to Heppner, thanking him for his concern, but stating, "We can appreciate your concern about the play . . . but the President has no authority to do as you suggest, even if he thought such action warranted. Such productions are, quite rightly I believe, protected under the First Amendment of our Constitution. The American people, with their good judgment, will see this play for exactly what it is" (AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library).

Journalists, such as John Chapple of Ashland, Wisconsin's *Ashland Daily Press*, contacted the White House and wanted to see "The author, and those responsible for financing and producing MACBIRD . . . sued for criminal slander and the play closed down by police action" (AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library).

Another newspaperman, William Loeb, president of *Manchester New Hampshire Union Leader/New Hampshire Sunday News*, disapproved of the play and crusaded to have it quashed. The following excerpts from his correspondence with the White House offer a window into the typical frustration and outrage felt by moderate-to-left-wing constituents who were not accustomed to post-McCarthy-era tolerance of seditious art. On February 3, 1967, Loeb wrote to the president, "While our newspaper does not always agree with everything that you do, this 'Macbird' play and book are so outrageous that I personally wrote the attached front page editorial, 'President Johnson is NOT a

Murderer.' I hope it does some good." Loeb's editorial appeared in the *Manchester Union Leader* January 25, 1967, a few days after the play opened at the Village Gate in New York City. Loeb based much of his ethos on his godfather having been none other than President Theodore Roosevelt, whom Loeb quotes: "'Patriotism means to stand by the country but not necessarily by the President; the President should be opposed when he is inefficient or fails in some way.'" Loeb then wrote in screaming, all-caps type:

> HOWEVER, IMPLYING THAT THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES IS A MURDERER IS SOMETHING THAT ABSOLUTELY GOES BEYOND THE PALE. BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT IS IMPLIED IN A PRESENT OFF-BROADWAY PRODUCTION WITH BARBARA GARSON IN POLITICAL SATIRE, PATTERNED AFTER "MACBETH," WHICH IS CALLED "*MACBIRD!*" (AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library)

William Loeb's anger gained momentum as he published more anti-*MacBird!* articles and sent letters and telegrams to the White House throughout the month of February:

> The Communists and their numerous followers in the United States [are] FURIOUS over the fact that President Johnson refuses to give the Communists what they want [in Vietnam] and Bobby Kennedy and his left-wing followers. Any respectable, sensible person who would sit down and see such a play and, by buying a ticket, condone such a performance, is also unthinkable but, unfortunately, in the present state of morals in this

> country, no doubt a great many people will do exactly that. (AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library)

Such anti-Communist rhetoric infiltrated right-wing discourse in the Sixties; anything subversive was likely to be dubbed "Communist." For Loeb and many others, *MacBird!* epitomized the extent to which the country was sliding into immorality, which they saw as essential to communism. In one of his many letters urging the President to halt production of the play, Loeb sent Johnson "a marked front page editorial calling for an injunction against the play, 'MacBird', which implies that you were responsible [for] the murder of President Kennedy." Along with it, he wrote, "There is no point of ignoring this because this play does not represent a single incident but, rather, just one step in a long campaign to vilify you which is being carefully promoted by the left wingers. It is necessary to stop this campaign before it goes too far." By Feb. 23, Loeb was outraged that the play was going forward and that Johnson was doing nothing to stop it. This time he sent a telegram to Johnson, continuing and intensifying his running rant that,

> [*MacBird!* violates] every concept of decency as a well as patriotism and fair play. The guarantees of freedom of speech and press certainly cover political satires such as Gilbert & Sullivans operas, Kaufman's "Of Thee I Sing" and many other hard hitting attacks, on political institutions and political leaders, but constitutional guarantees of rights and speech do not cover accusing a private citizen, let along [sic] a president of the United States, of murder. (AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library)

Loeb was accurate in his observation that *MacBird!* was "BEYOND THE PALE." Until *MacBird!* came along, criticism of the Sixties political scene had been at least diplomatic, but Garson's blatant calling-out of political atrocities, oversights, and corruption ushered in a new irreverence in regard to presidential authority.

Loeb and others, outraged at Garson's audacity, sought to take censorship into their own hands. Loeb told the President that in an effort to "spare you from doing anything about it," his newspaper had taken the liberty of contacting its own lawyers to consult with lawyers in New York to find out what could be done to bring an injunction against showing *MacBird!*. The counsel found no avenue for censoring the play, so Loeb (once again evoking the name of his renowned godfather) suggested that Johnson turn the matter over to the U.S. Attorney in the Southern District of New York, adding "This is not without precedent. My godfather, President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, brought a successful libel action against a man, called Barnes, in New York State who had accused him of excessive use of alcohol (AR 7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library). Finally, Loeb beseeched the President to take the play seriously, calling it an attempt to connect the President with Kennedy's assassination and destroy confidence in the office of the Presidency itself. "This is not just a cooky (sic) incident," Loeb warned, "but a cooky group, which can't be ignored without harm to the nation" (AR 7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library).

The White House appeared to take the high road by dismissing *MacBird!*, as if the play were beneath the dignity of the Oval Office's attention, and adhering to constitutional freedom of speech. Mary K. Arledge of Newport Beach, California sent a

letter of concern, dated December 23, 1967, along with a copy of *MacBird!,* to President Johnson (PU2-6, FG1, WHCF, Box 208, LBJ Library). White House aide Whitney Shoemaker sent Arledge a thank you, dated December 26, and ostensibly declined to comment, stating, "We are familiar with the book you enclosed but make it a policy not to comment on such things." Ironically, the White House letter goes on to do just that—comment on the play: "In our democracy we must rely on the intelligence of the people to distinguish fair comment or characterization from unfairly or cruelly motivated fiction. The glory and strength of our country is that, far more often than not, the people have made the distinction and expressed themselves clearly when time came for that" (PU2-6, FG 1, WHCF, Box 208 #1903, LBJ Library). The implied-yet-unofficial message from the White House was that the play was "unfairly [and] cruelly motivated," and only unintelligent people would deem it otherwise. Arledge could no doubt be assured that the White House deemed her one of those patriots who had "made the distinction" properly.

Some distinguished members of the Catholic clergy also showed their disapproval of the play and their support of the President. On May 18, 1967, Johnson received an anti-*MacBird!* letter from Rev. Francis N. Wendell of The Dominican Laity in New York City. In the letter, Wendell criticized the play, although he "did not and would not see" it. He mentioned that he had "seen many accounts and reviews of it," which, according to him were mostly unfavorable. Wendell added that he "was also delighted to see that it was thoroughly rejected in London" where it was also playing. Wendell enclosed along with his letter a copy of the *Josephinum Review*, the monthly newsletter of Pontifical College Josephinum. Monsignor Leonard J. Fick, a well known literary scholar and editor

of the magazine, had written a lengthy column disparaging the play (PR12, WHCF, Box 275, LBJ Library). Fick's column in the enclosed newsletter bashed *MacBird!*, Garson, and liberals in general, claiming that contrary to the opinions of "Dwight Macdonald, Robert Brustein, Eric Bentley, [and] Henry Hewes, among others," *MacBird!* is not satire because, according to Fick, in order for something to be satire, it must exaggerate something factual, and "there is absolutely no basis in fact of the view that the President of the United States is homicidal." Fick called the play "the most shocking and most vicious exhibition of bad taste in the annals of America's literature. It is an almost incredible violation of the spirit of free speech. It is the most astounding instance of verbal back-stabbing yet perpetrated, a colossal display of 'how to play dirty' and apparently make money at it" (2). Fick's final and discrediting knock-out punch was in his conclusion, where he discredited Garson by mentioning her affiliation with the Trotskyite-Communist Young Socialist Alliance and the University of California's Fair Play for Cuba Executive Committee (3).

Something highly unusual about Wendell's letter is that Johnson himself replied to it rather than delegating the task to one of his aides. Johnson wrote, "Thank you for your recent letter and for sharing with me Monsignor Fick's editorial," and expressed his appreciation for Wendell's "understanding and support" (PR12 PU 2-2/W*, WHCF, Box 275, LBJ Library). The anomalous response to a constituent raises the question of why Johnson skirted Loeb's rant and recognized Fick's. President Johnson was perhaps especially attentive to the Catholic clergy, not only because he needed, and for the time being, had Catholic support on his Vietnam policy (Califano, FG 411/U-Z, WHCF, Box

337, LBJ Library), but also because of Kennedy's being a Catholic. If prominent Catholic clergymen did not suspect Johnson's involvement in the assassination of JFK, who could, really? And if they vehemently opposed the implication in *MacBird!*, so much the better.

Not all correspondence to the White House carried such a polemical and frantic tone; at least one stalwart citizen communicated more objectively and articulately his ideas about *MacBird!.* Norman Larson, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota who was deeply involved in politics and who had frequently, throughout the Sixties, written to the White House about various political matters, sent a letter about *MacBird!* dated April 29, 1967. Larson respectfully and eloquently expressed that he was writing a research paper about *MacBird!* and hoped the President would not feel imposed upon to respond. Larson's rhetoric showed more savvy than most others who appeared to believe they were actually informing the President of something he had never heard of; Larson indicated his assumption that Johnson has "undoubtedly heard of the play 'Macbird.'" Nonetheless, Larson offered a concise precis of the play, including of course the central plot that implicates Johnson in the assassination of JFK, as he expressed his own concern "with freedom of speech, but . . . also. . . with the responsibility of those who speak, or, as in the case of the author of 'Macbird,' those who write." Larson quoted a negative *New Yorker* review in which critic Edith Oliver condemned Garson's work as vulgar, and the "FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin," wherein J. Edgar Hoover himself renounced the play. Larson closed with a straightforward request for answers to questions that perhaps pled for a lenient response from Johnson: "America is perhaps the only country on this earth where such a play could have been produced at all. Do you agree with this? Do you think

that some government agency should have made an effort to suppress the play? Do you think that freedom of speech should be extended to a play such as this which has been described as 'vulgarity'?" (AR, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library).

Now a professor emeritus of St. Thomas Catholic College, Norman Larson does not remember sending the *MacBird!* letter, nor receiving a White House reply, which is understandable given the forty-year gap in time and the fact that Larson so routinely corresponded with the White House. The LBJ Library has on file a referral dated May 2, 1967 from Johnson's assistant, Paul M. Popple, to the Attorney General's office requesting "suitable acknowledgment or other appropriate handling" regarding Larson's letter (AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library), but to date, I have yet to find the Attorney General's reply to Larson's astute questions.

It is interesting that while most who wrote to Johnson saw *MacBird!* as treasonous, Larson viewed its very existence as evidence of freedom in the United States. Larson's questions zero in on the problem Johnson's administration faced when responding to *MacBird!*: the need to project a stance that embraced freedom of speech while also snubbing and indirectly condemning Garson's attack.

LBJ's Decline

MacBird! was causing a stir as popular opinion of Johnson was slipping rapidly, and public attacks such as Garson's abounded. An April 1, 1967 article in the *New York Times*, headlined "Hoover Assails 'MacBird!' Author," reveals the FBI Director's claim that the play was part of a movement to "'destroy all acceptable standards of personal conduct and sane behavior.'" The article quotes excerpts from J. Edgar Hoover's "attack

in a foreword to the Federal Bureau of Investigation monthly Law Enforcement Bulletin, which is distributed free to 57,000 law enforcement officials," which referenced *MacBird!*:

> "We should be alarmed when widespread recognition and monetary awards go to a person who writes a 'satirical' piece of trash which maliciously defames the President of our country and insinuates he murdered his predecessor [and we should] stop deifying offbeat dolts whose ability is measured only by how they can dip their poisonous pens into the pots of blasphemy, filth and falsehood." (29)

The article's framing of Hoover as "assailant" and "attacker" of Garson-as-victim, rather than as defender of the President, is indicative of a widespread public shift away from reverence of established authority, including the head of the FBI and the President.

In April, 1967, while *MacBird!* was gaining steam and drawing crowds of both supporters and opponents, former special assistant to Johnson and president of the Motion Picture Association of America, Jack Valenti, sent Johnson a clipping from a *Chicago Tribune* article editorial in defense of LBJ, entitled "The Vilification of the President." The article quoted White House correspondent Merriman Smith, who claimed that Johnson had become "'the object of some of the worst vilification—even obscenity,'" he had seen in his over 25 years as White House correspondent. The article stated:

> Mr. Smith cited some of the obscene signs carried in the recent "peace" demonstrations in New York, the signs and songs that President Johnson is

> deliberately burning Asian babies with napalm, and the pamphlets and other material alleging that Johnson engineered the death of President Kennedy . . . He does not deserve the assaults he has been getting from the peaceniks, the "black power" crowd, the liberal intellectuals, and other assorted fanatics. (PR 12, WHCF, Box 275, LBJ Library)

Johnson remained personally removed from *MacBird!* for the most part, and LBJ biographer, Randall Woods, mentions, "If LBJ took note of MacBird, there is no record of it . . ." (763). I conclude, however, that Johnson's response to Reverend Wendell alone refutes that. In addition, there may well be other, as-yet-undiscovered archives in the LBJ library documenting Johnson's consideration of the play.

Very early in *MacBird!'s* production history, Johnson received one letter that could not easily be avoided with doublespeak because it involved a case of censorship that became very public. As *MacBird!* was being launched, Jay Rosenblatt, publisher of *Showcard*, the "standard playbill for the Off-Broadway legitimate theatres," refused to print *MacBird!'s* playbill (AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library). The January 11, 1967 issue of the *New York Times* quoted Rosenblatt's complaint of the play's "'clear implication in the plot that Johnson had engineered the assassination of President Kennedy.'" Unlike many who opposed the play, Rosenblatt had read the script, and declared, "'If those people think they can make a fortune out of a national tragedy, they're crazy" (Zolotow, "Program Printer"). *The Times* included in the article a comment from noted producer, director, and founder of the New Theatre in New York, Ivor David Balding: "While I may not agree with the production, I'm extremely upset by

prior censorship of this kind by a service of this nature. I'm seriously considering printing my own programs for my future Off Broadway ventures" (Zolotow, "Program Printer"). "The very next day, in a follow-up article, *The Times* reported that *MacBird!'s* producers, Julia Curtis and David Dretzin, had commissioned for the printing of the program Grove Press, the publisher that was also printing the script. The article mentioned that "in a retaliatory move against Mr. Rosenblatt, James Walsh, producer of Norman Mailer's play, "The Deer Park," due Jan. 24 at the Theater de Lys said he would have the program printed elsewhere: 'I object to Mr. Rosenblatt's attitude of censorship'" (Zolotow, "Airline"). That very day, Rosenblatt composed a letter to the President, explaining his position on the production of *MacBird!*, which he described to Johnson as "an intolerable situation, which affects you both as President of our country and personally as a man." Rosenblatt continued, "For the first time in my history of doing business I have refused to print a theatre program for an upcoming production," and he identified *MacBird!*, along with the schedule of its premiere and opening dates. In his letter, Rosenblatt explained to the President that he believed those involved in *MacBird!* to be "guilty of the worst imaginable taste," and adds, "Far more injurious than the mere exhibition of extremely bad taste is the clear-cut working premise of the script that you, Sir, (portrayed as a parody of 'Macbeth') engineered the assassination of President Kennedy." Rosenblatt presumptuously advised the President, much as William Loeb did:

> Permit me to be blunt, Sir. This is a serious matter. The producers think they will make a fortune with this thing. This is not going to be a small, hush-hush, underground show. Somebody has to put these people in their

> place. May I respectfully suggest that someone on your legal staff examine the script, and take whatever steps the law allows to protect YOUR RIGHTS as an individual as well as those of your office. (AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library)

In the letter, Rosenblatt described himself humbly to Johnson as a 29-year-old proud American from a "'liberal' background" who was "just one small voice, running a small publishing company." He told Johnson he "anticipate[d] being publicly accused of 'censorship'" while the producers went on to print the program elsewhere. At the time Rosenblatt wrote the letter, both of these things had already happened and been reported—publicly—in the daily *Times*. (Rosenblatt surely knew this at the time he wrote the letter.) Rosenblatt concluded with, "You, Sir, are entitled to all the rights and protection of any other citizen and I am prepared to defend those rights as I would expect mine to be so defended" and offered his cooperation to the President (EX AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library).

The Rosenblatt ordeal caused some stir as White House staff collaborated to pacify Rosenblatt without leaving tangible evidence of the Oval Office's acknowledgment of the play. In a White House memorandum, dated January 16, 1967, Special Counsel Harry McPherson indicated to Chief of Staff Marvin Watson their agreed-upon resolution to the Rosenblatt/*MacBird!* conflagration:

> I called [staff member] Arthur Krim this morning and asked him to get in touch with Rosenblatt. He was to say that "friends of the President very much appreciate the depth of your feelings on this matter. You must surely

> understand, however, that the President should not become involved in any legal action or public relations campaign against the author or producer of this play." Also, there would be no reply to this letter. Arthur just called back to say he had done this. Rosenblatt was grateful for the call and said he understood completely. I would just file this letter. (AR7, WHCF, Box 14, LBJ Library)

The White House obviously considered the Rosenblatt ordeal sensitive, and the scramble among Johnson's staff to hush Rosenblatt and leave no paper trail reveals the administration's policy not to touch *MacBird!*, either legally or in terms of public relations.

Such staff interventions as the phone call to Rosenblatt by "friends of the President" to preserve Johnson's dignity had become business as usual. When asked in a 1968 interview about this period of Johnson's decline and the staff's attempts to protect the President from the onslaught of embarrassing attacks on his character, Harry McPherson said,

> Well, we tried it until it began to fall apart in late 1967. And then after March 31st of 1968, it didn't make much difference whether we did or not. We were out of it, but we tried for a long time, with some degree of success on occasions. I suppose from a practical point of view what we were attempting to do was to keep the newspapers from cutting him to shreds, and to try to help him in his attempt to communicate with the

> American people and to prevent savage anti-Johnson material in the newspapers. (Transcript, Oral History Interview II, LBJ Library)

MacBird!, central to the cultural forces that were "cutting [LBJ] to shreds" during his downfall, was playing to sold-out audiences in the United States, topping the paperback bestseller lists in New York ("Best Sellers"), and attracting theaters around the world who were vying for the rights to produce it ("Negotiations"). The extent to which *MacBird!* contributed to LBJ's downfall cannot be known. One book critic who referred in recent years to *MacBird!* put it most aptly: "The play kicked up a mild furor that split more or less along the lines of 'How dare she?' versus 'He had it coming.' The one thing nobody thought to say at the time was that Johnson indeed bore a striking resemblance to Macbeth in at least one sense: here was a man who, while capable of great good, had somehow managed to engineer his own destruction" (Jones).

Barbara Garson would, no doubt, agree. To this day, she has said that while she gave Johnson his due in comparing him to the character Macbeth, whose ambition and arrogance go to extremes and result in his downfall, she also, in the character of *MacBird!,* "showed him as a large figure," who did many good things—much as Johnson saw himself, and similar to the picture Bill Moyers painted of him in later memoirs, with a "level of nobility so great, when he dies, he utters the words, 'Thus cracks a noble heart'; this is what someone else says about Hamlet, but [Johnson] says it about himself. There's a lot of self-pity in the play. But I don't have him showing his scars. I don't have him pulling dog's ears," both of the latter being familiar photo images of Johnson that circulated in the news and reinforced public opinion that he was unrefined. In contrast to

him, Garson notes, “The Kennedys did so little and got credit as though they were golden. It drove Johnson nuts” (Personal interview 18 Oct. 2008).

Perhaps no other theater piece has raised more interrogation about the boundaries of free speech in the United States, and what constitutes literary merit. Today, four decades after its debut, *MacBird!* and its history—the drama behind the drama—invite our gaze and scrutiny as we consider which of Brook’s and Brustein’s questions have been explored and answered. Was *MacBird!*, as Brustein now acknowledges, irresponsible? Or was it, as Peter Brook asserts, powerfully pro-American? And to what extent did Garson’s overstepping of tradition, taste, and propriety change irrevocably politically motivated performance, publishing, and activism? Rather than shunting the play to the sidelines as meaningless, we must re-examine *MacBird!* as a meritorious text and theatrical event that resounded throughout the U.S. and the world.

Chapter Two

Post-script *MacBird!*: Production on Stage, Record, and Film

As the Grove edition of the published *MacBird!* sold like hotcakes prior to its opening off-Broadway, a multitude of agencies, theaters, institutes, and individuals sought to produce and adapt *MacBird!* for various purposes. The obvious and intended use of the script as a staged play resulted in hundreds of productions throughout the United States and internationally within a span of about two years. I include here only a sampling of locations and companies from the list of United States entities that staged productions of *MacBird!*: Atlanta; Boston; Los Angeles; Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre in New Orleans; Houston; University of North Dakota; St. Paul; John Carroll University in Cleveland; Ohio State University in Columbus; Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska; Garland Jr. College in Boston; Kellogg Community College in Battle Creek, Michigan; Fair Oaks, California; Merry Go Round Playhouse in Coral Gables, Florida; Candlelight Theatre in Chicago; Concert Gallery in Flint, Michigan; Mars Hill College in Mars Hill, North Carolina; Court Players Theatre Company in Detroit; Grace Methodist Church in Bangor, Maine; Actor's Quarter Theatre in San Diego; Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, DC; New London High School in New London, Iowa; Huntington Playhouse in Cleveland; Wolfgang Schmidt & Tom Thomas in Beverly Hills; Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock; Florida Presbyterian College in St. Petersburg, Florida; Hand Puppet Theatre in Las Vegas; Washington Players Dept of Drama, Washington College; and Committee Theatre of San Francisco. The list of foreign theaters that sought rights to translate, adapt, or produce *MacBird!* is similarly long and

varied, as this chapter will reveal. The scope of interest in Garson's play was indeed phenomenal.

In addition, many individuals and companies sought to adapt *MacBird!* for recording or broadcast, either for commercial or educational purposes. Included among these, both domestically and internationally, were KPFK Radio (PACIFICA) in North Hollywood, California; Grove Press Recording in New York; Collier Encyclopedia; Long Beach Armed Services Program; Manhattan School of Music; Monument Film Corporation in New York; CBS News; and the American Broadcasting Company, to name a few.

The accounts that follow feature four of the more prominent productions of *MacBird!*: the original off-Broadway production; the London production; the Brazil production, and the Japanese production. It was in the Sixties as it is today: successful plays were adapted to film. This chapter concludes with the story of *MacBird!'s* near miss as a Hollywood film before it slipped into obscurity after the assassination of Robert Kennedy in June of 1969.

Off-Broadway: *MacBird!'s* Difficult Debut

Barbara Garson disputes a common rumor that *MacBird!* premiered in San Francisco before going on to New York (Rorabaugh 113), saying "A group wanted to do a few scenes at a demonstration in Berkeley but never got it on. Then, well after the New York production had opened, there was a production by The Committee in San

Francisco.[6] There were no productions before New York, though we had sold 205,000 books by the time the play opened" (E-mail 21 Feb. 2008).

In addition to initial difficulties finding a mainstream publisher courageous enough to publish the script and the program, the producers of *MacBird!* also had some difficulty finding a venue. It was rumored that some theater owners were approached by "trench-coated figures who told them there would be trouble if they took on *MacBird!*" (Garson personal interview 18 Oct. 2008). Another controversial (and suspicious) occurrence surfaced in the *New York Times* on January 30, before *MacBird!'s* official February 8 opening. The headline read: "WCBS-TV WITHHOLDS 'MACBIRD!' SEGMENT," and the article reported that "Filmed scenes from 'MacBird!' . . . were not presented as scheduled last night on WCBS-TV's 'Eye on New York Journal,'" reportedly because of "visual flaws in a portion of the film." The article explained the premise of the play, hinted at its seditious nature, and concluded ironically with, "A report on mathematics as taught in public schools here was substituted last night for 'MacBird!'" ("WCBS").

The play previewed for four weeks before its official opening, according to *New York Times* critic, Lewis Funke, "without major incident." Funke's tone was sarcastic, as he followed this conclusion with the list of highly unusual incidents that actually did occur subsequent to opening:

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[6] The Committee Theater was an improvisational satirical review founded in 1963 by Alan Myerson and Irene Riordan, members of Chicago's Second City. The group did eventually produce *MacBird!* in San Francisco. They disbanded in 1973 ("The Committee").

> Oh, there was a change of directors, but that was, everyone says, strictly a personal matter. An off-Broadway program publisher did refuse to publish the program (for that matter publishers generally shied away from publishing the play originally) . . . a segment of the play was to have been offered over WCBS-TV's "Eye on New York," but was withdrawn at the last minute for reasons not clearly explained. The management has tried to take every possible precaution to avoid violations of building and fire department regulations—inspectors recently spent four hours poking around every nook and cranny. [par] Otherwise, nothing really. (93)

Funke referred to Garson as "a most eloquent young woman," whom he quoted as saying that audiences have "'been laughing at the satire and then some have muttered at the end, "Disgusting"—things like that but no incidents,'" and, "'The funny thing is that the play has become a kind of barometer of public feeling from day to day. Sympathy for Robert Kennedy, for example, has dwindled since the Manchester business'" (100, 102). The "Manchester business" Garson referred to was an account of JFK's assassination, authorized by the Kennedy family and written by JFK's biographer, William Manchester. For various reasons, controversy surrounded the account even before it was published in 1968 (Manchester).

Roy Levine, making his New York debut as the director, fanned the flames of controversy prior to the opening in his public statement, "The intention is not to bring Shakespeare down to a prosaic level. Instead the play uses the old model to raise our leaders to the heroic proportions that their villainy deserves." Levine described the set,

which “like Shakespeare’s is an apron extended deeply into a hall. This form of staging,” he claimed, “bridges the gap between Shakespeare and Brecht in bringing the theater directly to its audience” (Zolotow, “‘M’Bird’ Will Open”). Levine’s vision must have played out effectively because Royal Shakespeare Company director, Peter Brook, described the play as having “the spirit and style [of] Elizabethan theater [in which the] audience sits at café tables round a raised platform and the actors, on easy, intimate terms with them, exchange common references through a nod or a hint.” Brook likens the production to “a shot-gun marriage between Shakespeare and Spike Milligan in which rain-coats, tam-o’shanters, breastplates and snatches of song draw a strip of lurid pictures, a horror comic sprinkled with crude puns and jangling rhymes” (“‘MacBird’ Lets Fly”).

MacBird! first previewed at the Village Gate jazz club in New York on January 19, 1967. It was produced by Julia Curtis and David Dretzin and directed by Roy Levine with a young, as-yet-unknown cast that included Stacy Keach as MacBird, Rue McClanahan as Lady MacBird, and William DeVane as John Ken O’Dunc, the JFK lookalike (Garson). It was purported that the four weeks’ preview before the official opening was to keep the press away. In a February 22 *New York Times* article entitled, “‘M’BIRD!’ GETS OFF TO FLYING START: It Will ‘Open’ Tonight After a Profitable Month,” Dan Sullivan reported, “‘MacBird!’ flies tonight, at long last, and there is reason to believe that it will be in the air for a while no matter what potshots the critics may take at it . . . [and it] is in excellent health for an Off Broadway show that hasn’t technically opened yet.” Sullivan noted that, remarkably,

> More than a month of preview performances . . . have returned almost half of the $30,000 it took to get the show on the boards. And the box office yesterday reported a healthy advance sale of $10,000. MB was supposed to have opened on Feb. 8. When the opening was postponed to tonight, some people whispered that the producers were ducking the critics. But co-producer David Dretzin gave out that "technical reasons forced the postponement." Also Roy Levine quit the show, and Gerald Freedman took over. "But if we were frightened of the critics, we wouldn't open at all." (22)

Sullivan's interviews with Dretzin and Garson give a vivid picture of those early pre-opening nights at the Village Gate: "There has been some booing, Mr. Dretzin reported, ('we're not sure at whom'), and one man got up in the middle of a performance and yelled: 'Villain!' But most audiences have been 'warm and responsive.'" Sullivan noted, "Many listeners found the play mild stuff indeed. One young man got up during a question-and-answer at the end and said, in disgust, that 'MacBird!' demonstrated 'the utter impotence of the American left,'" and added, "'Creative man does not shock or entertain the bourgeoisie,' he said, just before stalking from the theater. 'He kills them.'" Garson reportedly "'received that statement with an amused smile," and then explained to the audience that her intent was not to accuse President Johnson of assassinating Kennedy; instead she wanted to develop a vague sense that these leaders 'are silly.' She remarked that 'To build an effective political movement from these vague feelings is

'harder work, less fun,' . . . but for the moment, she said, quoting a line in her play, 'Trouble stirred is always for the good.'"

Theater critic Robert Brustein, who engaged with the play and reviewed it favorably, even from its inception as an underground text, also reviewed it when it appeared off-Broadway. In his initial review of the production, Robert Brustein described opening night as "a production being performed in full panoply at a swinging Greenwich Village coffeehouse before an audience composed not only of well-wishers but of Broadway celebrities, gossip columnists, theatre journalists, and political commentators—possibly the most divided audience I have ever joined" and claimed that "the work itself, full of irrepressible impudence and anarchic zest has been beautifully produced and immediately calms one's fears that it might not act as well as it reads" (*Third Theatre* 55).

Brustein also described in detail the irreverent depictions of Lady Bird Johnson embodied in McClanahan's Lady MacBird, who showed up for the sleepwalking scene with her face besmeared with cold cream and curlers in her hair. The critic praised the entire cast, but most of all Stacy Keach for his performance of MacBird, with "a pelvic strut, a rolling tongue, and a powerfully brutal presence which makes his fall harrowing as well as hilarious" (*Third Theatre* 59). Keach won an Obie for his performance of MacBird. Brustein pronounced the production "excellent in all respects," with a Brechtian flair in its over-the-top amalgam of Shakespearean and contemporary make-up, costumes, and props (*Third Theatre* 58).

As with the written text, which had circulated widely prior to any production, some others criticized the play for its "undergraduate humor," but most audience members loved it—even many who were not fond of Garson's politics or script. In an overview of off-Broadway plays of the season, *Educational Theatre Journal's* Glenn Loney said *MacBird!* "waxed fat on its 'succes de scandale,' with dynamic staging by Roy Levine, and energetic, inventive playing by Stacy Keach, William DeVane, and Rue McClanahan, among others. I am not one of Barbara Garson's idolators, but I thoroughly enjoyed the production" (395-6).

Hard evidence of *MacBird!'s* popularity as an off-Broadway show was seen at the box office. By May 5, *The New York Times* reported that "all $30,000 had been returned to MacBird's 50 backers, and an additional $10,000 had been placed in a contingency fund" (Zolotow, "Polish Allegory").

Amid the fanfare, political controversy swirled around the production, according to Rue McClanahan, who has recounted tales of bomb threats each night of the show, and backstage drama among the cast, crew, and producers in her recent autobiography (*My First Five Husbands* 136). Throughout its run, many changes occurred, including the replacement of Levine with Freedman. The actors who created the roles also left and were replaced; this turnover received evoked responses from Garson's agent, Toby Cole, who continued to attend performances from time to time. William Devane, whose performance of the character of Robert Ken O'Dunc, launched him as the definitive Bobby Kennedy impersonator of the period, was a favorite. When he left the show, Garson commented in a September 3, 1967 letter to Toby Cole, "I read somewhere that

Bill Devane has left the show. That's really too bad. In some ways he was more irreplaceable than Stacey [Keach]. I mean Stacey created the role [of MacBird] in a way that other people could imitate. But Bill didn't do anything but just be the part and no one can really imitate that." Garson also made the astute point that once a show like *MacBird!* makes it big and goes through such casting and directing changes, its quality is liable to decline:

> Oh well, I guess that's the way with off-Broadway. I really think people should go back and review shows from time to time so they could say things like "It's really fallen apart don't go anymore." I guess that wouldn't be so good for us. I remember when I saw Three Penny Opera in New York, toward the close of its run I guess. Boy was that dismal disgrace. I hope MacBird isn't that way. (2:14, Toby Cole Archives)

Regardless of the turnovers in director, cast, and even venue, *MacBird!* enjoyed a long, successful run in New York, closing in January 1968 after 379 off-Broadway shows at the Village Gate and the Garrick.

Other Ventures

Peripheral to the off-Broadway play, the New York producers launched two other major ventures. One was a long-play album recording, produced by Grove Press as "a new line of literary records" (Cole to Czech, 2: 10, Toby Cole Archives), featuring the original off-Broadway cast, and sporting a very large copy of the image seen on the cover of the published script: Lisa Lyons' caricature of Johnson/MacBird wearing a plaid kilt, cowboy boots and spurs, charging full speed and carrying a lance and a shield

emblazoned with the image of an eagle, in caricature, as it appears on the Presidential seal. A letter to Garson from her agent announced, "The records finally came Friday. I'll send an album with Marvin. When I negotiated with Seaver for Lisa Lyons he wasn't sure how much space her illustration would occupy. It's the whole damn cover!" (3 April 1967, 2:7, Toby Cole Archives).

New York Times critic, Thomas Lask, reviewed the two-disk recording of the performance as "less spirited, less bouncy than that given at the [Village] Gate." He noted that the then-high tech stereo used in the recording was "not used with great imagination," and that the separation of sound was "employed merely to keep the actors apart, rather than to add spaciousness or effect to the performance."

Lask excused the actors, who "speak clearly, keep the flow and rhythm of the lines and shade them for effect" and particularly praised leading man Stacy Keach, who "caught the manner, the tone, the flat delivery of the original with disturbing accuracy. His speech at his first meeting the press is the high point of the play both in substance and delivery." Lask noted that "'MacBird' is not a play that has quite the same charge the second time round. But if you haven't seen it recently or want to know what all the fuss is about, the Evergreen album will certainly bring you up to date." The recording is still available through used book dealers. Having not seen the play originally, I can only imagine that the straightforward, flat studio recording I hear comes far short of the lively stage performances recounted in reviews. However, the vinyl record serves as a valuable artifact that captures at least the voices of the original cast (Garson *MacBird! A Recording*).

The other major venture of the off-Broadway producers was the formation of a touring company, which was "organized as a limited partnership, separate and apart from the original MacBird Company," and which opened in January 1968. In a November 1, 1967 memo to Garson's agent, David Dretzin wrote, "The first ten weeks of bookings have already been arranged; we will play in Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, Dayton, Cincinnati, Wilmington, New Haven and have a few one night stands at colleges and universities. The rest of the bookings will be made after we open." Especially interesting is that by this time, the play had gained a somewhat mainstream following, evidenced by Dretzin's comment that "MacBird is required or suggested reading in many colleges, universities and high schools and, for this and other reasons, it is especially well known to students" (14: 38, Toby Cole Archives).

MacBird! Abroad

Concurrent with publication of the script in New York, and before the show's opening off-Broadway, foreign theaters began vying for rights to produce *MacBird!*. Although the New York producers maintained control over the off-Broadway production and several other *MacBird!*-related ventures, such as the touring company, the record album, and various television projects throughout the play's run, Garson turned all other deals over to Toby Cole, a New York agent and self-proclaimed "advocate for socially-relevant work." Sam Shepard and other rebel artists offered their plays to her because of her "championing of outsiders" (Cole 199).

International response to *MacBird!* was phenomenal. Toby Cole negotiated with theaters in France, Sweden, East Germany, Japan, Argentina, Yugoslavia, Switzerland,

England, The Netherlands, Spain, Australia, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Canada, Venezuela, and the list goes on.

The London Production

Several of London's most prominent producers jockeyed to gain rights to *MacBird!*. Donald Albery, who would in 1977 be knighted for his contributions to the dramatic arts ("Sir Donald Albery"), was expressing such eagerness to produce the play that on December 14, 1966, Toby Cole sent a letter requesting he not present the script to the British theater censors until after its off-Broadway opening (2: 10, Toby Cole Archives). It is unclear whether Cole was aware that Michael White and Oscar Lewenstein, two other impresarios of London's West End, had by that time already submitted *MacBird!* to the Lord Chamberlain's Office on November 6, 1966 (7 Nov. 1966, LR 1966/2, Lord Chamberlain's Papers). By January 2, White and Lewenstein had published a press release that they had secured the rights to *MacBird!* in England, so Albery inquired of Cole via his own agent in New York whether the published claim was true. His agent promptly replied by telegram, "ABSOLUTELY NO FOREIGN RIGHTS YET DECIDED STOP WHITE LIE MISS COLES LETTER FOLLOWS" (4 Jan. 1967, Sir Donald Albery Records). Cole's subsequent letter confirmed that no rights had been granted, and that the decision about that would not be made until after the opening. Albery, who was known for producing controversial plays, contacted Cole, flew in for a preview performance, and for 150 pounds, finally secured an agreement for Calabash Productions in London (Sir Donald Albery Records).

At this point, the promise and possibility for success in England seemed limitless. But as it happened, of all the productions throughout the U.S. and the world, which were by and large quite successful, the London production was, by almost all accounts, a fiasco.

The Lord Chamberlain's Office

One of the first hurdles in the ill-fated British production of *MacBird!* was its script having to undergo the scrutiny of the censorious Lord Chamberlain's Office, a branch of the British monarchy that for 200 years had the task of censoring theater. According to the Royal Household's current website, *The Monarchy Today*, "All plays to be performed upon the British stage had to be approved by readers from this department" ("Lord Chamberlain's"). But Peter Hall, founder of the modern Royal Shakespeare Company, and RSC artistic director from 1960-1968 ("A History: RSC"), puts it this way: "For 200 years the Lord Chamberlain removed the adult, the accurate and the outspoken from the British stage, as well as the lewd, the raucous and the plain dirty." Hall, who has directed theater in England since the Fifites, remembers when

> Britain, the land of liberty, the upholder of free speech, debate and contention, allowed our stages to be gagged. From the middle of the 18th century, every word, every action performed, had to be approved and licensed by royal officials. This control applied only to the theatre, not to publishing, journalism, broadcasting or film. Some have seen this as a compliment to the potency of theatre; it is more likely a repression by which our drama was kept immature and parochial for 200 years. (Hall)

In 1966, the role of theater censor was abolished and scheduled to be dissolved from the Lord Chamberlain's tasks. Peter Hall recollects,

> the antics of the censor seemed to get wilder as pressure for his removal increased. He took to explaining himself by way of justification - a thing unheard of 50 years before. When I submitted Samuel Beckett's Endgame, a letter came back with various deletions, including a line describing God as "the bastard! He doesn't exist". The Lord Chamberlain's letter observed: "The Lord Chamberlain will not countenance doubt being cast on the legitimacy of the Almighty."

It is therefore no surprise that the seditious and "obscene" *MacBird!,* one of the latter plays to come before the Lord Chamberlain's office, was rejected.

Historian George Simmers, who kindly researched the Lord Chamberlain's files for me at the British Library, transcribed and submitted to me excerpts from archives that tell the fascinating drama of *MacBird!'s* censorship in London. Simmers explains, "Reports were written on each play submitted. They contained a plot summary, and some comment on the play, noting anything that might be objectionable. Readers were often scathing about the literary quality of what they read" (E-mail 30 Jan. 2009). The first report on *MacBird!*, written by a reader named Heriot, included a brief summary, followed by,

> I am not sufficiently au fait with American politics to say whether this is libellous caricature or not. It does not appear to have been performed in the United States, in spite of the hysterical over-praise on the back cover.

Perhaps this is a case for the American Embassy?

If they should approve, the piece is, with the exception of

P 29 What a shit!

recommended for Licence. (Heriot, Lord Chamberlain's Papers)

Considering all of the obscene language in Garson's play, including the word "nigger" and other racial slurs, as well as the word "fuck," it is amusing that Heriot arbitrarily singled out "What a shit!" as the only unacceptable line. Another reader named Hill, who wrote a report dated November 16, concluded, "It is satire, one would almost say on the level of Swift, and as potent," and added, "My own view is that public and open attack of this nature upon the Head of a friendly Power should not be given advertisement in this country but if the bona fides of the persons concerned are equal to their beliefs they should put it on first in their own country and face whatever obloquy or victimisation or adulation, may come to them in consequence" (Lord Chamberlain's Papers). A subsequent memo from Heriot to the Lord Chamberlain recommends "we should tread carefully" and "ask the views of the American Ambassador" (16 Nov. 1966, Lord Chamberlain's Papers).

From there, the play was reviewed by Paul Gore-Booth, Permanent Under-Secretary of State of the [British] Foreign Office, who suggested, "The play could not be put on here until it had been tried out in the United States and that you would have an informal word with David Bruce, the American Ambassador in London. By November 30, Gore-Booth sent a letter to Bruce, informing him that the license had been refused, at

least for the time being. Gore-Booth added, "It is, as a matter of fact, quite funny, but a bit too hot, at any rate if it were produced first in London" (Lord Chamberlain's Papers).

On December 1, Michael White, who, like Albery, remains a prominent name in British theater production, wrote a note to the Lord Chamberlain's to say that the play had appeared in New York. This, of course, was not true; *MacBird!* never played anywhere until its premiere on January 19, 1967. In a prompt response, White's request to show *MacBird!* was refused, but he was told he could resubmit, "if at a later stage, evidence could be produced of a considerable run in the United States without undue unfavourable comment" (1 Dec. 1966, Lord Chamberlain's Papers).

Soon after, in a December 12, 1966 letter to the Lord Chamberlain's, American Ambassador David Bruce, having read the script, expressed "a certain admiration for the author," but stated, "I am not in a position to pass on whether or not its contents are libellous under American law; I do feel however, the text is in almost every respect, except that of style, objectionable" (Lord Chamberlain's Papers). Bruce's statement of admiration of Garson is shocking, considering the Ambassador's position as a respected statesman in close association with Johnson.

Although Albery had bought the rights to produce *MacBird!,* the censors stood in the way of his doing so in a West End theater. The connection between Donald Albery and Littlewood's Theatre Workshop Company is unclear, but it appears that Albery made a deal with Joan Littlewood to produce the play in a club until it was approved to play in an official theater. However, by the time *MacBird!* was in the hands of director Joan

Littlewood and her agent, Gerry Raffles, any hope of the Lord Chamberlain's approval had vanished.

Raffles wrote defiantly to the censors, "We intend to present the play at the Theatre Royal, Stratford on March 20th, and as this means that we shall be starting rehearsals in a few days, I would be greatly obliged if you could let me have any comments about or deletions from the play which you think necessary" (9 Feb. 1967 Lord Chamberlain's Papers), but all he received was a memo in reply, similar to the one sent to White refusing permission to produce the play at all (15 Feb. 1967 Lord Chamberlain's Papers). Raffles had an appointment with the Lord Chamberlain's on February 23, at which he apparently announced his intention to present the play as a club performance. A subsequent internal memo within the Lord Chamberlain's office suggested that the Lord Chamberlain's should threaten Littlewood with prosecution. However, previous prosecution of the play, *Saved*, in which a baby is stoned to death, failed when "everyone in the theatre, from Olivier down, came out to support it" (Simmers, Email 30 Jan. 2009). A struggle ensued between Raffles and the Lord Chamberlain's as Raffles showed up at the Lord Chamberlain's office with early reviews of the un-approved play, showing that the negative comments had to do with theatrical considerations, not political ones (23 Feb. 1967, Lord Chamberlain's Papers). Ambassador Bruce also sent reviews of the New York production (3 Mar. 1967, Lord Chamberlain's Papers). Evidence that Raffles was trying to stay on the side of the law is seen in his frequent visits to the office and his reports of the theater company's club status, which the Lord Chamberlain's considered to be of dubious legal status.

Such concern on the part of the Lord Chamberlain's issued in police intervention when on March 7, Superintendant W. Hemmings of West Ham Police Station investigated the status of the Theatre Club and its liquor license (Lord Chamberlain's Papers). But more importantly, U.S. Embassy Minister, Philip Kaiser (in the absence of David Bruce), met with the Lord Chamberlain to discuss the matter. A subsequent internal memo reads, "I shall not be in a hurry to encourage DPP (Director of Public Prosecutions) to prosecute" (15 Mar. 1967, Lord Chamberlain's Papers). No reason is given, but George Simmers poses several possibilities: "Because Royal Court prosecution had failed? Because Kaiser not very worried? Because they didn't want to seem like unreasonable political censors?" (E-mail 30 Jan. 2009). I surmise that Kaiser maintained a stance that was consistent with those who were concurrently fielding letters in the White House regarding censorship of *MacBird!*: the Johnson administration was against censorship and would leave judgment of the play to the people. In addition, an undated Lord Chamberlain's office internal memo implies that regulation of "all matters affecting indecency and obscenity" had become unpopular, and the D.P.P. had "little to gain and much to lose" (Lord Chamberlain's Papers). After that, relations lightened between Raffles and the Lord Chamberlain's. The Assistant Comptroller reported that Raffles "asked if we should be hot on the club trail, and I said we should probably not be too fierce – but if he quoted me I should wring his neck!" (17 Mar. 1967, Lord Chamberlain's Papers). The extent to which the times were changing may be seen in a wry memo, dated May 18, 1967, from the Assistant Comptroller to the Lord Chamberlain: "I understand this finishes at the Theatre Royal, Stratford on May 20th. I

was asked today to attend the last performance as the guest of the Theatre. I have declined the invitation" (Lord Chamberlain's Papers).

In the end, the authorities stayed away. An opening night review of Littlewood's *MacBird!* explains, "The Lord Chamberlain was said to be determined to stamp out so iniquitous an attack on the head of state of a friendly nation. So the production would be run under the auspices of a private-club (membership fee, one shilling--fourteen cents!)" (Esslin X3).

The Littlewood Fiasco

Being, as she was, in New York, Cole relied upon an agent in London named Dr. Suzanne Czech, who, in the beginning of negotiations regarding *MacBird!,* expressed enthusiasm and cooperation about the project. In a January 20, 1967 letter to Cole, Czech wrote, "I feel the play will prove dynamite" (2:18, Toby Cole Archives). But while Czech's intentions were not intentionally sinister, she turned out to be an uncooperative representative of Cole in England and a fickle liaison between Garson's interests and director Joan Littlewood's production. Although Toby Cole did all she could to represent her client faithfully, it appears that Czech's resistance to Cole's directives contributed partly to what came to be known among the *MacBird!* people as "The Littlewood fiasco."

That Czech had her own ideas about the way things should go in England, regardless of Cole's requests, is evident in letters concerning the selection of a director for the London production. Czech, who employed superlatives, exclamation points, and hyperbole in all her correspondence, enthusiastically supported a bid for Charles Marowitz on one day (6 Feb. 1967, 2:18, Toby Cole Archives), and three days later,

argued emphatically for Joan Littlewood instead, whose agent, Gerry Raffles, Czech had already spoken to:

> Barbara Garson will have to give a certain leeway to Joan Littlewood regarding the script; it is quite true that some of the things in it which are immediately understandable to an American audience, will need a little modification to be equally comprehensible to an English audience! I have Gerry's word that there is no intention whatever of 'playing about' with the script – if they didn't love it, Joan Littlewood would not want to do it! And as you know, she has been proved right most of the times – she half re-wrote in fact, Bhean's first success, QUARE FELLOW, and put him on the map. So the author can trust her; after all, she is such a prominent and successful director that a first play by an unknown author could hardly do better than being produced by her!!" (10 Feb. 1967, 2:18, Toby Cole Archives)

Knowing what we now know about the Littlewood fiasco, Czech's reassuringly euphoric letter reads as a "famous last words" document. "Gerry's word" about careful script changes, assurances of Littlewood's being "right most of the times," and the author being able to trust Littlewood with her play were all breached in the end.

In the meantime, Toby Cole was torn between Peter Brook and Joan Littlewood to direct the London production, and sent a letter asking Czech to contact Brook to determine his interest. Cole also expressed happy ambivalence between the two renowned directors in her letter, "it seems to me the most exciting potential for the play is

Joan's return to England to direct it. Am I right? Or, Brook at the [Royal Shakespeare Company]. Perhaps this is fantasy on my part. Brook may not consider the play 'important' enough" (8 Feb. 1967, 2:10, Toby Cole Archives). "Joan's return to England," which Cole mentions here, was a much-anticipated event, as Littlewood had been away for several years and was due to return that spring (Holdsworth 39).

Cole's and Czech's many airmail letters crisscrossed throughout February and March, as Cole delightedly reported that Brook had indeed seen the play and had "told Barney Rosset of Grove Press it was the best American production he'd seen in years!" (17 Feb. 1967, 2:10, Toby Cole Archives). But by March 3, Czech casually mentioned in a letter to Cole that she "did not even try to talk to Peter Brook," as Cole had requested, offering a smattering of excuses for ignoring the request: Brook "is away at the moment anyhow"; "the Royal Shakespeare have their programme established to the end of the year"; and "I think myself that MACBIRD is not quite the play for the RSC anyhow." Czech added that "to wait for Peter Brook would mean ruining the chances of an immediate production—and then you can kiss it all good-bye" (2 Mar. 1967, 2:18, Toby Cole Archives). It is obvious that Czech had taken it upon herself to nix Cole's suggestion about Brook and had already begun to negotiate with Joan Littlewood.

To be fair to Czech, she and Cole were dealing with slow mail across the Atlantic, and a very topical play, which needed to be produced quickly. And Littlewood, who was known for her radical bent, did seem a promising and viable candidate for directing Garson's radical play. Cole might have decided upon Littlewood regardless, even if given the choice of Brook. But it is tempting to wonder how differently Garson and *MacBird!*

might be remembered if the play had been in the hands of Peter Brook, whose glowing and copious praise of *MacBird!* is a solid indicator that he would have preserved Garson's language and spirit in his direction of it. As it turns out, though, the choice was never offered to Brook, and Czech went forward with no consideration of Cole's wish to offer it to him.

That said, the idea of Joan Littlewood directing *MacBird!* was exciting. Regarding all other productions throughout the world, Garson was vigilant about preserving the play's artistic and political integrity as it passed into the hands of foreign producers, but she was surprisingly open to Littlewood's desire to alter the script, perhaps because Garson placed faith in Littlewood's credibility as a radically political director. All Garson asked was to be consulted about changes and to be (silently) present during rehearsals, for which she requested Littlewood provide travel expenses.

Toby Cole did all she could to secure Garson's moderate requests that would allow the playwright to approve script changes and to be afforded travel accommodations, but the agent met with strong resistance. On these points, Czech's role as Cole's representative in negotiations went from disregard to antagonism as Littlewood and the Workshop Theatre went into rehearsal. By February 27 Czech argued furiously against Garson's right to approve any script changes, and against the contractual clause that Littlewood pay for Garson's travel to England to sit in on rehearsals. The following letter shows the extent to which Czech advocated for Littlewood and against Garson and Cole:

> Joan feels—and rightly, as even I think!—that no American unfamiliar with the London scene and the political attitudes in Great Britain . . . could understand just where this kind of satire would misfire with an audience to whom the allusions mean nothing, or too little. As for wanting the author for rehearsals: the brutal truth is that Joan L. hates having authors around, and with a first play, would feel—again, quite rightly,—that the author could learn from her, but not vice versa. Once Barbara has a couple of big international successes with plays, she can throw her weight in, and make demands . . . Most authors are kept away from production as much as possible. This sounds cynical, but with good reason, in the case of first plays from inexperienced authors. (27 Feb. 1967, 2:18, Toby Cole Archives)

Czech's message could not have been palatable to Cole, who always advocated on behalf of author agency. Cole responded immediately and politely, yet firmly, "I understand what you've written me about Joan's attitude – but I still feel Barbara has a right to be present – a silent observer, but a helpful one." Cole explained to Czech that although she didn't want to lose the deal, she would call it off if Littlewood refused to honor the requests. Cole also mentioned that she did not want to subject Garson to any antagonism or awkwardness by sending her to join Littlewood under strained conditions (27 Feb 1967, 2:10, Toby Cole Archives).

On the same day, before she could have even posted the letter, Czech wrote yet another missive, explaining that Littlewood "desperately wants the contract" and that

Czech had "talked and bullied and coaxed again about a trip for the author" to no avail; the Theatre Workshop had no funds or precedent for paying an author's travel fare. Czech expressed her feeling that Barbara Garson was "overstepping her role" as a playwright, and urged Cole to back off of the demands of the contract.

Cole's push for Garson's rights eventually, according to Czech, put Gerry Raffles, who was Littlewood's partner both professionally and romantically, "quite in despair" to the point that "this may throw the whole contract." Czech wrote, "We are all very angry about the terrible waste of time caused entirely by the author," and went on to say, "One would have thought that a London production by Joan Littlewood would have been important enough to treat preferentially," and cited Garson's stipulation to approve textual changes as "frightening." Czech revised her earlier rhetoric that there would be "no 'playing about' with the script," permission for "a certain leeway" and "a little modification;" now Czech was saying, "I had warned you from the word go that Joan Littlewood would want a free hand." Czech supported Littlewood's flat refusal to fund Garson's trip (13 Mar. 1967, 2:19, Toby Cole Archives).

Cole finally compromised, conceding to no funds from Littlewood for Garson's trip, "So long as [Garson] is welcome if she comes on her own—which she wants to do." Cole held firm to her conviction: "I don't believe there is justification for excluding an author from her play, no matter how gifted the director" (3 Mar. 1967, 4:101, Toby Cole Archives). Garson paid her own way to London where she attended rehearsals, but her hands were tied. While there, Garson received a letter from Toby Cole inquiring about "what Joan is doing with, or to, MACB." Cole wrote, "I've a feeling I didn't prepare you

enough for the long way from Levine-Freedman [directors of the New York show] to Joan Littlewood" (3 April 1967, 2:7, Toby Cole Archives).

The London production opened on April 8, 1967 at the Theatre Royal, which, according to an early review, was "a playhouse that ran as a club, so that the Lord Chamberlain's censorial power could not apply," where it got "one thin round of applause." Garson's only comment to the press on opening night was that she did not like the production and "would like to have her name removed from the credits." The first review to hit the London papers complained that "Miss Littlewood's production bears almost no relation to the play Barbara Garson has written and successfully torpedoes what was already a somewhat fragile, leaky craft," and that the director "turned a bilious little political parody into a vaudeville romp and left one completely nonplussed by her tactics" ("London Production").

As reviews of the Littlewood fiasco poured in, Czech hypocritically disavowed herself from any association with the production. Amid reviews, which she described as "frankly, quite catastrophic," Czech wrote, "What makes me so mad, is that Joan Littlewood of all people should have let us down so badly—even if it was up to Barbara to protest and stand up against it, as things were developing in front of her eyes," and sought excuses and blame wherever she could strike out, implying that the play was more fit for "college groups and amateurs and political drama groups" than "in the 'commercial theatre,'" and adding that "we were all deceived" (11 April 1967, 2:20, Toby Cole Archives).

Garson took the disappointment philosophically, but she also felt understandably crushed and humiliated. Her husband, Marvin, conveyed to Cole,

> Barbara was in no mood to talk to the press afterwards. A determined BBC camera crew chased her around the theatre lobby, then across the street to a pub. She hid behind some curtains and, upon being discovered, fled upstairs to the ladies' room. The BBC crew was waiting outside still, so she finally exited via a fire escape. Can we hope for better luck in France? (April 11, 1967, 2:20, Toby Cole Archives)

Czech reported to Cole that as a result of the Littlewood Fiasco, Garson "feels that perhaps the only natural habitat of MACBIRD is America, where it can be fully understood and appreciated, and where she likes the way small groups are picking it up all over the country, and do it with the right engaged enthusiasm. She is convinced that Joan was <u>incapable</u> of presenting the play in the original form, the lines did not begin to have the right meaning to her" (11 April 1967, 2:20, Toby Cole Archives).

In the end, there must have been some consolation for Garson since all but one critic, Tariq Ali (Rankin), blamed the production's failure on Littlewood's mishandling, dismissal, and re-hauling of her original text. Famed British scholar and author of *Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin, wrote a review, which appeared in both London's *Times* and the *New York Times*, and which represents the typical stance that the play was good under the direction of Levine, but not Littlewood. Esslin described the buzz among the British audience on opening night, as they wondered, "What would Joan Littlewood make of [*MacBird!*] on her return, after several years' absence, to her old theater in the

East End of London?" Esslin observed that "expectations ran high [as] rumors swept London" that the Lord Chamberlain was censoring the play. Esslin recounted his own foreboding as he eyed a program that "bore little resemblance to the program in New York. No prologue? No witches?"

The ensuing show confirmed Esslin's trepidation: "Barely a line of Barbara Garson's Shakespearean verse has survived. Instead there is prose that bears the marks of having been hurriedly improvised during rehearsals" and "no trace is left of perhaps the happiest inspiration of the text, the three contemporary American witches" (X3). Cutting the witches rendered the play not only un-funny, according to Esslin, but it also created "a tremendous dramaturgical problem" in regard to the central conflicts of both *Macbeth* and *MacBird!*, which are based on the witches' prophecies. Esslin's review takes on the tone of a lament of what could and should have happened with *MacBird!* on the English stage:

> Only very occasionally a line from the original text floats by, and it immediately lifts the flat, ad-libbed prose text up into a brief flight into satire. Barbara Garson's text may be sophomoric but oh how gloriously witty, rhythmical, vital it sounds at these moments. For it allows a brief glimpse of a genuine over-all concept and the brilliant basic idea of the whole enterprise—to portray contemporary figures in the conventions, and in a parody of the language, of Shakespearean history plays and tragedies. (1)

Esslin bitterly referred to the disregard with which Littlewood "simply [threw Garson's work] out of the window" in her "ragbag of hastily improvised charades on the theme of the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam war and the usual clichés of primitive anti-Americanism" (1), as he continued,

> To show President Johnson as a Texas cowboy singing a Will Rogers song while twirling a lasso might in itself be funny, but it breaks the framework of the basic satirical intention of the piece. And this process of disruption is carried on so relentlessly by Joan Littlewood that in the end hardly a scrap of that basic concept survives. It is difficult to understand why Joan Littlewood should have wanted to discard what now seems, by comparison, a veritable masterpiece of coherence and parodistic wit. Barbara Garson had a first-rate idea which was carefully worked out in an utterly viable text. (X3)

In Martin Esslin's attempt to understand Littlewood's motivation, he cited the "prevailing opinion of the London first night audience [which] was: 'Well Joan *always* changes the text of plays she is working on.'" But Esslin's frustration, which reflects the frustration of so many who knew *MacBird!'s* worth, is evident as he probed further for an answer:

> Fair enough, if it's a bad or incoherent text. But to discard an excellent text, merely for the sake of change? At times I had a feeling that Miss Littlewood had shied away from too close a parallel with Shakespeare, perhaps because she felt that, in England, tampering with a sacred text might be more deeply resented than in the United States. If so, she would

> be a far more timid woman than we know her to be. [par] Or did she think that the American allusions of the original were too difficult for an English audience to understand? . . . Whatever the motive a good text has been discarded and a weak one, indeed a non-existent one, substituted . . . Joan Littlewood's "MacBird!" is a dismal failure. It makes Barbara Garson's "MacBird!" shine with the luster of a comic masterpiece" (X3).

As for Garson, even before leaving London, Suzanne Czech found it "quite astonishing . . . how little resentful Barbara is towards Joan. She acknowledges that she has learned a lot from watching her in production, and shrugs the failure off as 'having lost the gamble!'" (11 April 1967, 2:20, Toby Cole Archives).

Two days after opening night, while still in London, Garson wrote the following letter, which I quote in its entirety because it clearly and eloquently explains not only the playwright's discontent about the end product, but also Joan Littlewood's blatant disregard of her as a fellow artist and playwright:

> Dear Joan and Gerry,
>
> I know it won't come as any surprise to you that I'm unhappy with the play you've just produced under the title MACBIRD. During the rehearsals you constantly assured me that the play was changing and that I could not yet judge the final product. Although I suggested many changes that would restore much of the language I wrote, or at least the meaning of the language, I did not feel competent to say definitely that what you were

doing was wrong because your method of rehearsing made it difficult to say what the final product was going to be.

Now that I have seen a complete performance before a live audience, I think it's important for me to tell you exactly how I feel about it.

Your production is lively and may get livelier as you go over it, but I cannot really see what it is about. I have been embarrassed by the political thought of your production, which seems trivial to me; the theme seems to be that politicians are vain, and nothing more.

I had raised objections during rehearsals, but had agreed with Gerry that I was not going to say anything in public until I saw the final product. At your request, and in my own judgment, I avoided that whole issue whenever reporters asked me about it.

But now that your production has been mounted on the stage, I find it impossible to think of it as my play in any sense. It has the same title as the play I wrote, and many of the characters have the same names, but the resemblance ends there. Of the 2000-odd lines in my play, you have used about twenty; the lines you have written in their place may be good or bad, but they simply don't have the same tone or even the same thought.

It would of course be unfair of me to ask, at this late date, that the play not continue at the Workshop. But I do think that billing, as it stands now, is unfair to me and misleading to the public, so I request that it be

changed to read: "Based on an idea by Barbara Garson". And I must insist that this production, even if granted a licence, does not go to the West-End.

I'm sure you realize how much I've come to like you personally, how much I kept hoping that the production would come around to a form which I could approve of, and how hard it is for me to have to write this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Barbara Garson (10 April 1967, 2:23, Toby Cole Archives)

Garson appears to have put the matter to rest after writing the letter, but Cole was left to pick up pieces and try to salvage what she could. In a May 10th letter to Czech, Cole wrote that she "took [Barbara] to task for not being more firm in stopping it. It would have been unpleasant, but we might have saved the play for a better situation." Cole also mentioned a plan to send an American troupe to do the play in Europe, but Littlewood would have had to let go of the rights she had contracted for—to produce the play in the West End (10 May 1967, 2:11, Toby Cole Archives). This was followed by more correspondence from Cole to Czech expressing the agent's depression over abysmal reviews she was reading in the *Times*, *Express*, and *Financial Times*. Puzzled by the inexplicable changes Littlewood had made in directing the play, Cole asked, "Has she taken leave of all her good sense—theatrical and otherwise?" She expressed hope that the play would "be closed down at once—so that the possibility might still exist for another company—perhaps in the Fall—to do it as Barbara wrote it" (12 May 1967, 2:11, Toby

Cole Archives). As time went on, and more reviews and details of the Littlewood fiasco reached Cole, the agent became noticeably enraged. In an April 21 letter, she wrote,

> From all accounts it is a fiasco! Absolutely incredible – and shattering. How can one ever count on anything in the theatre? Certainly Joan was the obvious choice. Even allowing for her tinkering, which we all knew about, how could she have thrown out all but 20 lines? I will never understand, until Barbara gets back, how she could have permitted it to go on. We were covered legally and Barbara had every legal right to stop the play. . . Also, I was very worried to read that actual names – Kennedy and Johnson – have been inserted. I've asked Barbara's lawyer to look into this aspect of the production immediately. It might make Barbara vulnerable to libel suits. (2:11, Toby Cole Archives)

Cole made some attempt at re-launching *MacBird!* in London, appealing to the English Stage Society's artistic director, William Gaskill, of the Royal Court Theatre, on the grounds that "For all practical purposes . . . MACBIRD has not been seen, or heard, in London" (6 Dec. 1967, 2:11, Toby Cole Archives). Cole's proposal to Gaskill included sending the original New York cast to London, but nothing ever came of the idea. Fortunately for Garson and Cole, *MacBird!* fared well everywhere else internationally.

Before departing from the topic of the London production, it is worth noting that there were those who enjoyed the show on its own terms. Historian George Simmers

attended opening night and recalls in an E-mail interview the atmosphere of excitement and transgression around the censored play:

> I remember it was one of those first nights when there was a real buzz in the theatre - Joan Littlewood returning, with a play that had caused some scandal in America. The night was an event - so much so that the BBC London TV news interviewed audience members on the way out. I was one who was picked on, and was asked whether a play about Johnson killing Kennedy wasn't totally irresponsible. I think I said something like, "It's vaudeville, not a documentary. I really enjoyed it." The clip was on TV next day, and in my slightly conservative workplace (a print shop) there may have been murmurs about my going to such a weird play. (1 Dec. 2008)

Censorship issues aside, Simmers still defends the British production and agrees with Joan Littlewood's intuition to overhaul the text. He believes that because of *MacBird!'s* concentration on the Lyndon Johnson versus Robert Kennedy match, British audiences would not have understood or appreciated the play in its original form. Simmers drives his argument home with the indisputable fact that Littlewood's *MacBird!* was extended beyond its expected run, which indicates it was "a bit messy, but by no means a total failure" (E-mail 26 Jan. 2009), at least not commercially.

Censorship in Latin America

Censorship of *MacBird!* abroad was seen perhaps most dramatically in Latin America. A letter to Toby Cole on behalf of producer Manolo Fabregas in Mexico City

expresses Fabregas' desire to do the play, but "he has not started yet the rehearsals for 'Macbird' due to the fact that he is having problems with the censorship" (Suarez, 2:11, 24 April 1967, Toby Cole Archives). Likewise, Hugo A. Brown in Buenos Aires, Argentina expressed his concern:

> I'd like to ask you about the american [sic] staging of the play. So far, most of my associates are a little bit worried about the possible official reaction to a play that "places in jeopardy the honor of a friendly nation", as the jargon goes. [par] Did you have any trouble? Was there any official ban on Mrs. Garson's work? Were you obliged to make any changes in the original? [par] If you could send me that information it would be of great help in establishing our position before the authorities here. As usual in underdeveloped countries, we are more papist than the Pope here, and it will be more than enough to get the play banned if the American Embassy says, "What a pity" or some similar diplomatic understatement." (9 Feb. 1968, 2:17, Toby Cole Archives)

Several unapproved versions of the script and unsanctioned stage productions were reported, including a pirated version of the text published in Venezuela in March of 1967. The *New York Times* reported that for several days Caracas' newspaper, *El Mundo*, ran large front-page ads billing *MacBird!* as an "extremely informative" account of the Kennedy assassination. "The implication intended by El Mundo's editors was crystal clear for Venezuelan leaders accustomed to getting much of their news from between lines: 'MacBird!' contains more 'news' than theater." The *Times* quoted *El Mundo's*

director, who said, "'We estimate that the publication of the play is going to raise our circulation by 20,000 readers a day'" ("'MacBird' Appears"). Garson's lawyers ordered *El Mundo* to "cease and desist publishing the play [since] there [was] no authorized Spanish language version of MacBird!" at the time (Bondy and Schloss, 2:24, Toby Cole Archives).

The shutting down of a publication such as that in Caracas must have felt problematic to Barbara Garson, whose initial purpose in writing *MacBird!* was to broadcast her subversive message about the Johnsons and Kennedys, but who also possessed a deep concern regarding the artistic and political integrity of the script in translation. This is evident in a missive from Marvin Garson to an overseas agent:

> When you meet Barbara, you will find that she does not at all correspond to the stereotype of the sensitive author who issues daily accusations against those who are "ruining her play". She has been very flexible about the various American productions, and I know she will be even more flexible about adaptations into foreign languages. She is much more concerned about faithfulness to the spirit of the play as she wrote it than about faithfulness in literal details. (Garson, Marvin 18 Mar. 1967, 2:24, Toby Cole Archives)

Barbara Garson wrote to Toby Cole in August of 1968 that she "saw in a CIA or State Dept. digest . . . the director of the Cuban production [of *MacBird!*] was interviewed. Plans for the play for the first fortnight in August during the scheduled Latin American Solidarity Organization Conference (the one Stokely Carmichael is in Cuba

for).” Carmichael, the legendary Civil Rights leader, and the Garsons traveled in the same radical circles, and Garson wrote a telegram to the theater that read, “Buena Suerte Con MacBird Y Digale Hello a Stokely.” She added that she would also be sending a letter to the Cuban producer complaining that she had to find out about the bootleg production of her play from the CIA (2 August 1968, 2:14, Toby Cole Archives). The inconsistency with which the Caracas publication was stifled while Garson herself sent a good luck message to plagiarists in Cuba presents a dichotomy: Garson got caught in a commercial success, when, really, she had a political agenda.

Augusto Boal’s Brazil Production

My most flabbergasting discovery in the Toby Cole Archives at UC Davis was the fact that Augusto Boal had produced and directed *MacBird!.* Boal is now renowned for developing Theatre of the Oppressed, a method by which theater is used as a venue for dialogue and cultural change. “From his work Boal evolved various forms of theatre workshops and performances which aimed to meet the needs of all people for interaction, dialogue, critical thinking, action, and fun” (Paterson par 2). In a letter to Cole, dated March 28, 1969, Boal recapped the events surrounding his production, which opened in Sao Paulo November 14, 1968. Boal reported good houses and money in the beginning, after which audiences fell off. “The month of December is one of the worst of the year [for theater], and January is one of the best . . . so, we expected to have a very good January for Macbird.” But political oppression intervened. Boal wrote, “On December, the 13th, was edited the Institutional Act number 5 – according to which many personal liberties were not granted anymore – this act was the same as an ‘etat de siege.’” The act

affected "all theaters that had plays running, and the audiences, frightened with the political situation, stayed away from all plays." Since Boal's Arena Theatre was known for its leftist leanings, it suffered the close scrutiny of governmental authority. Boal recounted to Cole:

> This year, according to the, let's say, authorities, three kinds of people made the, let's say, subversion possible. These three groups are: the priests, the students, and the theatre artists. So, the let's say authorities started questioning priests, students and artists. And of course we had to answer why we had such a play (Macbird) on the boards. I was in Europe by that time. It was a very fortunate coincidence that I had a passport ready to fly to Paris on December the 14th. And it was a very unfortunate coincidence that the rest of the cast had not. So, many actors had to answer some questions about politics and art to people who could not understand either. Exactly two months after opening, Macbird was forced to leave the boards. I am very sorry, but I'm quite sure you and Miss Garson will understand we had no more conditions to keep on doing the play.

Boal also discussed royalties in his letter to Toby Cole. He explained,

> The Sociedade Brasile de Autores Teatrais does not allow any company to start a show if the previous one is not paid for. They are very quick and eager to get the money, but not to give it away. So I advise you to write to them asking for the royalties. Be sure that they have the whole amount of

> two months that was the career of the play. You don't have to expect too much money—in Brazil theatre is very cheap. (2:17, Toby Cole Archives)

Other items in the Toby Cole archives related to Boal's Brazilian production are a poster and the program. The poster features a close-up of the actor, Renato Consorte, who played *MacBird!.* Constorte's disdainful demeanor is nearly identical to Stacy Keach's in photos from the New York production. It is likely that Consorte modeled his countenance after the image of Keach on the cover of the off-Broadway production. His eyes are furtive, his mouth downturned and lined. The program, written in Portuguese, lists Augusto Boal as director and Barbara Garson as "satirist." It also includes two grainy shots of the stage production, and a translated interview with Garson, as well as photos of Boal and Garson. (21:6 Toby Cole Archives) The program notes and pictures indicate a production that, unlike Joan Littlewood's, regarded Garson highly as a playwright and was in keeping with Garson's artistic vision.

Barbara Garson was delighted when she recently learned of Boal's production, and was until now unaware he had directed the play during *MacBird!*'*s* heyday. However, she does see Boal every year when he conducts workshops at the Brecht Forum, a socialist institute in New York with which Garson is strongly associated. Both of these artist/activists are still connected through their political work.

The Japanese Production

Another major foreign production of *MacBird!* was performed in Japan by Troupe Sankikai, a group which has since gone by the name of The Tokyo Theater Ensemble and which was, at least by 1982, directed by the legendary "Japanese actor, director, theatre

reformer and Brecht expert," Senda (Hsia 49, Iwabuchi 114). It is unknown whether Senda was involved with *MacBird!*, but given the play's Brechtian style and Marxist roots, and Senda's drive to bring those influences into Japanese theater, along with Senda's connection to Troupe Sankikai, it is likely that he had strong connections to the production.

A letter from the Sankikai Troupe reveals the nature of their interest in the play:

> With regard to the contents of the play "Macbird", we believe it is not a mere exposure of the current politics of the U.S. but an earnest search for its true status. Bitter power politics is waged among political leaders in the dark which is far detached from the popular concern of the people. [par] The leaders of the nation are bent upon the execution of the war in Vietnam at all cost, while the drafting of young men is losing a big issue to the nation. We should like to explore the mental and psychological world of the American youth from the standpoint of youth of Japan. (3 June 1967, 2:22, Toby Cole Archives)

Once granted the rights to produce, the troupe wrote to Toby Cole of the warm reception of *MacBird!* in advance of its production: "The presentation of the 'Macbird' by our Sankikai troupe became the big talk of the town just as we announced. The stage draws the attention of many peoples, and wins very best popularity in advance" (14 June 1967, 2:7, Toby Cole Archives).

Troupe Sankikai demonstrated a spirit of cooperation in producing the play, and a particularly high regard of Garson as playwright, whom they invited to "come to Japan

and give guidance in our production." Along with the invitation, they wrote, "As we have advised in our previous letters […] our group is not financially a strong organization and we can not provide, which we deeply regret, an ample sum of funds to make her stay more attractive than the following plan" (3 June 1967, 2:22, Toby Cole Archives). The "humble" plan they proposed, however, generously included round trip fare to Tokyo, hotel accommodations, a scenic trip, and more. The openness and generosity of Troupe Sankikai contrasts sharply with Garson's relationship to the London production wherein Joan Littlewood radically, and underhandedly it appears, changed the script, flatly and unapologetically refused to help with Garson's travel or lodging, and preferred that Garson stay away from the rehearsals.

But censorship proved to be a factor in producing *MacBird!* in Japan as it was in Britain and elsewhere. Another letter from Garson to producer Nobuyuki Tsugane indicates Troupe Sankikai was taking the same kind of political risk typical in producing *MacBird!* in most other countries. Garson wrote, "I hope you don't suffer any greater difficulties due to the nature of my play. It is also quite subversive in the United States and we had a great deal of difficulty renting a theatre to perform in" (24 June 1967, 2:23, Toby Cole Archives).

More evidence of the great care the Japanese company took in regard to Cole's contract and Garson's agency as author is seen in Garson's response to Troupe Sankikai's concerns about the size of her name in billing the play:

> I certainly do not care at all whether my name is as big as the play. … Obviously I care much more about getting a political message across than

> having my name seen. This is why you may disregard or change the contract about the size of my name. However, I agree with Toby Cole that the play should not be altered. We have had very unfortunate experiences in foreign countries, especially England, where the play was changed so that it was embarrassing for me to see or hear about. (24 June 1967, 2:23, Toby Cole Archives)

Following on the heels of the "Littlewood fiasco," Toby Cole was particularly vigilant about the integrity of the text. In a letter to Garson, she wrote, "The Japanese wanted to 'eliminate certain parts' and add four songs at the beginning and end . . . but with the brutal Littlewood episode fresh in mind, I cabled them to follow the accurate translation of the text with no cuts and no additions and to return the contract immediately" (27 June 1967, 2:7, Toby Cole Archives).

Still, Garson recalls that, as with the London production, there were cultural differences that impeded understanding of the play in Japan. While she was there for the production, attending the rehearsals and shows, Garson wrote to Cole,

> I had an interview with a theatrical magazine and the first question asked by the group of distinguished theatrical men was as follows: 'We saw the play in New York and there the audience was laughing continually. I suppose you felt it a great failure that this very serious political play should serve for amusement.' I could not explain to them that I meant it to be funny, that the more people laugh the better I feel and that having people laugh at their national leaders seemed to me like a significant

> political matter as far as theatre could be significant politically. So perhaps the spirit is not translatable. I can't judge what I thought was too direct & heavy in Sarkashi's production. (22 July 1967, 2:14, Toby Cole Archives)

Garson was pregnant at the time of her visit to Japan and remembers being more tired than she normally would have been. She also recollects being mystified by the cultural gap that remained with the play in translation:

> They wanted me to say something at the beginning of each show. I would just say good evening ladies and gentlemen [in Japanese], and not knowing the language, I'd go into English with a translator, saying I hoped everyone would enjoy the show. People didn't laugh [on opening] night. I thought oh my god, but it kept going night after night . . . even though they weren't laughing. Then one night in my opening remarks . . . I said, "We enjoy this play a lot in the United States, and we get a lot of laughs at these characters." And that night everybody laughed! I thought, "I do not know what's going on here. I don't know what they're seeing. I don't know what they're feeling." (Personal interview 18 Oct. 2008)

Garson said that on nights when she said nothing about laughs, there were no laughs; when told they should laugh, they laughed. "I honestly couldn't tell you whether the production was humorous," Garson says to this day. "I don't know whether people refrained from laughing out of politeness or laughed out of politeness." But she adds, "The production was elegant with all the politicians wearing dark western suits with the narrow ties of the era. They had their features built up so they had noses and other

features making them look very much like the politicians in question. They were elegantly sculptured, not at all caricatures" (E-mail 26 Dec. 2008).

In retrospect, considering communication that flew back and forth via Suzanne Czech during negotiations with Littlewood, the difference between Garson's treatment by the two companies is probably in large part due to Littlewood's disdain of authorship, and overall British arrogance regarding Americans who deign to touch Shakespeare. For instance, one typical—and in fact favorable—British review of the London production of *MacBird!* ended condescendingly with, "In a city which is rather hard up for satire [*MacBird!*] makes a frisky, ingenious and not entirely frivolous evening. In any case, many Americans prefer their Shakespeare this way" (Shorter).

More pleasant but perhaps as unsettling, the Japanese, as Barbara Garson noted, were so polite that she was never sure about how they really felt about *MacBird!.* Beyond cultural differences, however, by the time Cole negotiated with Troupe Sankikai, she and Garson had learned hard lessons as a result of the Littlewood fiasco and guarded their interests more vigilantly.

Worldwide Desperation

Although it was a very American play, *MacBird!* resonated with the worldwide movement and mood of revolution against patriarchal oppression. Garson's audacious attack on the powerful U.S. leaders became an artistic means by which many, including theaters in countries behind the iron curtain, sought to oppose the U.S. and the so-called Establishment in general.

Some have cited *MacBird!* as exemplary of the desperation felt by those in the Sixties who, under the power of the right wing, felt disenfranchised. In her dissertation on the radical and highly theatrical Yippies (Youth International Party), Susanne Shawyer writes, "[*MacBird!*] demonstrates the rage and hopelessness of activists like Garson, and also the Yippies, who hated Johnson as a representation of the political elite and also yearned for a viable political alternative" (Shawyer 116).

Shawyer's conclusion regarding *MacBird!* as a desperate act echoes that of Walker Percy, who in his book, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, discusses the correlation between the indifference of the state and "ever more frantic attempts" by American writers to "attract attention, like an ignored child, even to the point of depicting President Johnson and Lady Bird plotting the assassination of Kennedy in Barbara Garson's *MacBird!*, or President Nixon having sex with Ethel Rosenberg and being buggered by Uncle Sam in Times Square in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*. Still, no one pays attention" (154).

Robert Brustein celebrated the American radical theater movement in a September 1966 *New York Times* article that raised eyebrows and, in a way, defined the phenomenon of desperation-turned-theater. Here, Brustein included *MacBird!* prominently among recent examples of third theater, which he identified as "supported mainly by the young [and combining] the youthful properties of intensity, exuberance and engagement." He charted its history as

> a theater that came to life during the off-Broadway movement of the fifties, reached its culmination in the work of the Living Theater, faltered

> for a moment after the trial and exile of Judith Malina and Julian Beck, gathered a little momentum with the experimental cabaret offerings of the off off-Broadway playwrights of the sixties, and has now reached full velocity in reaction to the intolerable Vietnam war. ("Critic Calls")

Brustein referred to the desperation, which had issued in third theater, "gradually becoming a rallying point for all those frustrated by the moral cant of government leaders and the artistic cant of cultural leaders, for its drama, though born out of a sense of ineffectualness, seeks relief from political impotence in untrammeled free expression" ("Critic Calls"). It is important to note that *MacBird!'s* international appeal, and the issues of censorship that arose almost everywhere it appeared, indicates that the frustration and desperation were felt not only in the U.S., but worldwide.

Of all countries seeking to produce *MacBird!*, France was exceptional because there was enough anti-American sentiment among the leadership there that censors were apparently unconcerned about its political message. At one point, Toby Cole beseeched Garson to approve a French production:

> It may be the only production we can get on the continent this season. I have word that the Stabile de Genoa has canceled, probably due to fear of censorship (the theatre is state subsidized) and while the Germans are just getting the translation, I'm not at all sure they'll get it on. Scandinavia is oddly silent too . . . I think they're all afraid of offending the U.S.—except for France. (4 Oct. 1967, 2:7. Toby Cole Archives)

Ironically, it seems, France was one place where no final negotiations were ever made in spite of numerous offers and extensive attempts, because the translators could not produce a version of the script that Garson could agree to.

The *MacBird!* Movie

As early as March of 1967, when the off-Broadway play was still early in its run, filmmakers were clamoring for the rights to film *MacBird!.* Toby Cole wrote to her agent, "We have about six propositions now, but none of them please Mrs. Garson" (15 Mar. 1967, 2:11, Toby Cole Archives). Perhaps it was because of the radical and underground nature of the script that some proposals had an alternative bent. E.P. Barnett wrote to *MacBird!'s* off-Broadway producer, David Dretzin, proposing a film "for distribution to motion picture theatres throughout the world, excluding New York City," so that people everywhere could see the stage production (20 March 1967, 2:24, Toby Cole Archives). Another individual, independent film maker Dick Swaback, proposed that a group on the University of Wisconsin campus produce a film version. He expressed that although unsure of how he would fund such a project, he was confident he could do so "on a restricted budget." Swaback wrote, "I am not interested in financial gain from this production but rather in the social significance this film would have by reaching a large audience" (19 Sept. 1966, 2:25, Toby Cole Archives). As with the unapproved publishing or performances that occasionally surfaced, offers like this one must have made Garson feel conflicted. Should *MacBird!* be a capital pursuit or a pursuit for social change? Had *MacBird!* remained a grass roots effort, offers such as Barnett's and Swaback's would surely have been appealing to Garson because their purpose was to

broadcast an anti-Establishment message. As it was, however, *MacBird!* was a moneymaker, and such non-commercial ventures stood to undercut its capitalist potential. Brustein's observation that third theater's "outspokenness . . . is its most significant identifying characteristic—artistic license becomes an alternative to commercial acceptance" (Brustein "A Critic Calls") points up the fact that *MacBird!'s* success as a professional theater piece put it at odds with the typical purpose of radical theater—and with Garson's original plans for it.

Other film offers were for TV production, but most were offers to do a Hollywood-style film. Garson's concerns regarding any filming of the play were similar to those regarding stage productions: integrity of the script as a political piece—not simply entertainment—as well as preservation of the artistic merits of the play. In a letter regarding one contract, Garson was hesitant because the producers wanted carte blanche with the script. She mentioned being burned by Littlewood and pointed out that a compromised TV or movie version would be permanent, and thus, even more devastating than the embarrassing London stage production. She also expressed concern that a movie contract would preclude TV rights, and Garson saw television as the most effective and promising way eventually to get her political message to the masses. In a letter to Cole, Garson wrote,

> We know that right now no one will use the whole thing on T.V. In all probability, the only likely T.V. production would be showing of the film some time far in the future by an educational T.V. station or network. But supposing the film isn't very good. Or just suppose that the new Education

> T.V. network being started by Fred Friendly (which I know many people connected with) should ask to perform the New York production when it is closing. This would be an extremely good way to get the play out in a form we can be reasonably confident about.

The letter shows Garson's awareness of the importance of the play, as well as its fragility if deposited in the wrong hands. Garson continued,

> I understand all the haste [to secure a movie deal], but I think some real fight [would] be made to see that the film is not some loose adaptation of the play. My experience with Joan Littlewood was certainly upsetting enough to teach me that lesson. And a film version which will have wider circulation than any single production is even more important. (23 Aug. 1967, 2:14, Toby Cole Archives)

After several broken deals with various filmmakers and directors, including David Stone and Jack Gelber, and Lou Shaw and Luther Davis, a contract was finally signed on February 15, 1968 with Wolf Pictures International and Tom Thomas, Inc. Wolf Schmidt would produce the film, and he agreed in writing that the film's director be approved by Garson. She was considering director and screenwriter Monte Hellman, with whom she was collaborating on the screenplay. Movie plans seemed to be developing well in spite of a tight time schedule. *MacBird!'s* fate as a topical political satire lay largely in the outcomes of the upcoming August 1968 Democratic convention, in which Robert Kennedy would more than likely, as predicted in *MacBird!*, face down Lyndon Johnson

in a bid for Presidential candidacy, a scenario identical to the *MacBird!* plot. Garson sent this brief update to Toby Cole:

> Script's coming along fine. Really monty [sic] is writing the screen part of the screen play and I am filling in the verse for extra scenes and for bridging gaps where scenes are left out. He seems to be an amazingly balanced person who can just take one difficulty after another, deal with it and move on. Still I think the rush is going to become unendurable as the producers have a contract with the distributor for delivering the film I believe in August, ready to show . . . Yes, it is all coming true. And I find myself in the ambiguous position of wishing that Bobby makes it just so my prediction will be right. Also, I'd rather be attacking a new president who everyone still loves than an already exposed tyrant. (Undated, 2:14, Toby Cole Archives)

In spite of Johnson's dropping out of the race on April 1, 1968, plans went ahead for the movie. An article in the *New York Times* reported, "President Johnson's announcement that he would not seek re-election played hob with publishers and entertainers yesterday as they began a scramble to rewrite, delete, modify and delay in print and onstage." The article referred to *MacBird!* among topical media that might be affected by Johnson's decision, but "Toby Cole, agent for Mrs. Garson, said that it was still a 'viable work' and that Mrs. Garson was writing a film version that the agent believed would not be affected by new developments" (Shepard).

Cole's statement to the *Times* was strictly true, since Democratic hopeful Robert Kennedy, satirized as the winner-by-default in the resolution of *MacBird!'s* plot, would only intensify public attention to the film. Martin Luther King, Jr. would be assassinated on April 4, only three days after Johnson's announcement, as the country plunged deeper into havoc. Production of the movie continued as planned, and in late April, Garson wrote, "I'm more convinced than ever that Hellman is THE right person to make this movie," adding that she also felt Hellman should direct the film since his movie, *The Shooting*, a serious Western parody, was, like *MacBird!*, also in verse (24 April 1968, 2:15, Toby Cole Archives).

In his biography of Monte Hellman, Brad Stevens quotes Hellman regarding his role in the movie plans for *MacBird!.* The passage reveals problems that had begun to crop up in film negotiations, which were threatening to halt production; the producers disagreed on Garson's choice of Hellman as adaptor/director of the movie:

> I didn't go headlong into [adapting *MacBird!*], but I found a way to do it that I thought would be interesting. I went to San Francisco to write the screenplay with Barbara Garson. My agent, Robin French, was negotiating my deal on MacBird with Wolf Schmidt, the producer, over the phone. The conversation went on for nearly an hour, with me sitting in the room. When Robin hung up [he said] the studio didn't like our screenplay—they wanted Bob Altman to do it. But Barbara wouldn't do it without me. (Hellman qtd. in Stevens 73-4)

Garson's lawyers brought suit against the film makers who breached contract by hiring someone other than Monte Hellman to direct ("'MacBird' Author Sues", 17:34, Toby Cole Archives), but as it turned out, the decision of who would direct the film became a moot point: on June 5, 1968, Robert Kennedy was assassinated while celebrating his successful campaign in the California primary.

In her book, *Talking Back to Shakespeare*, Martha Tuck Rozett discusses *MacBird!'s* abrupt demise, which was necessary in the context of national tragedy upon tragedy:

> Of all the Shakespeare transformations of the sixties, [*MacBird!*] may strike the reader as the most dated. Garson's burlesque implies that Johnson wanted Kennedy out of the way, benefitted from his death, and eventually fell from power because of a coalition of liberals, blacks, and antiwar activists manipulated by the Kennedy clan and their henchmen. She could not know, in December 1966, that eighteen months later Robert Kennedy would die in a horrific reenactment of his brother's assassination, a recapitulation of the 1963 tragedy that could have been plotted by a playwright with a penchant for iterative action. *Macbird* was thus, in a very real sense, obsolete by June 1968; its cynical portrayal of RFK would no doubt have been viewed as being in poor taste by Americans who looked back on the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King as one of the least funny episodes in our political history. (122)

When asked whether the breached contract or the RFK assassination was responsible for the aborted movie, Garson replied, "I never did understand what that movie deal was about" (E-mail 24 July 2008). This remains a bit mysterious, but the answer appears to be that both were instrumental in the scrapping of the plans.

Remembering *MacBird!*

From there, *MacBird!* slipped quietly into relative obscurity, but its trailblazing influence as a bold confrontation of governmental arrogance remained. By April of 1968, while *MacBird!* was still spinning off into local stage productions everywhere, and while a movie was still in the making, director Gordon Davidson credited Barbara Garson with being the only American playwright who "attempted such an explicit confrontation [while most] seem hesitant to grapple in direct terms with the questions of the day" (qtd. in Smith D26). Social criticism in the United States would never return to its former cloaked and subtle style, but would instead appear in more direct forms that emerged throughout the Seventies and to the present.

Robert Brustein, originally one of *MacBird!'s* greatest proponents, gradually tempered his enthusiasm regarding the play. His praise of Garson's work lost its luster over time, and the play that he once dubbed "one of the most brutally provocative works in American theatre" he has come to emphasize as "irresponsible, particularly in its blithe assumption that Johnson had arranged for President Kennedy's assassination," and explains, "I believed the play to be valuable less as a historical tract than as an emotional cathartic for our unrelieved feelings of frustration over the current political situation (*Making Scenes* 43).

In the absence of retrospective critical support, and in the presence of such cooling as Brustein's, *MacBird!* and Garson have not received their due as extraordinary forces that proved the power of theater as uniting and transformative. Peter Brook's praise-laden, lengthy critique of *MacBird!*, with its litany of ever-burning questions about what constitutes "good" theater, is still as cogent today as it was then, regardless of Sixties topicality or popularity. No piece of art that has shaken the world so soundly and pressed to their limits the boundaries of censorship should be shunted to the margins of history. It is time to re-think *MacBird!* in the context of our current era, forty years after it played off-Broadway and in theaters all around the world. The United States has seen yet again the tragic results of aggressive, imperialistic, and capitalistically inflexible leadership. *MacBird!* was an unprecedented theater event, which, if remembered and examined, inspires us and models for us great potential of performance in the face of oppression. We may learn from it lessons of history and resistance through art, but not if it is erased or discounted as having no literary worth.

PART II: Peri-feminist *MacBird!*

Examining the absence of women from the stage constitutes one branch of feminist theatre history. A further critical approach, working in tandem with the challenge to the 'canon', is the recovery of female-authored dramatic texts and theatrical contexts.
Elaine Aston, An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre

MacBird! was a significant event in theater history—an event that has, since 1968, gone largely unrecognized in spite of its impact on U.S. and international theater and politics. It might be quite enough simply to unearth it as I have done in the first section of this dissertation, upturning the fascinating political and production-related archives housed over the past three or so decades in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center and The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library at the University of Texas in Austin, and in the University of California's Special Collections at Berkeley and Davis, as well as the British Library. To press on with my investigation of *MacBird!* through a feminist lens invites skepticism since the play does not appear on the surface to carry an overt feminist agenda; indeed, the female characters are few and marginal. So why make trouble for myself and risk the damning label of "shrill feminist" by excoriating any elemental hint of women's issues or involvement in *MacBird!*? These, of course, are questions with which I have challenged myself to justify the time, thought, and energy spent on exploration into an against-the-grain intuition and insistence that the play belongs in the feminist canon. The following are discoveries and new inquiries, which have satisfied and propelled me beyond my original curiosity about *MacBird!.* I believe these provocative questions—and the critique to follow—will serve as convincing arguments of the significance of *MacBird!* as a precursor to feminist adaptation.

First, a major Shakespeare adaptation written by a woman in the Sixties is an anomaly. Who is/was this playwright that she would fly in the face of tradition and political power? How did she negotiate her status as a very young and successful woman in an undeniably man's world, and how were she and her play able to rise to such fame? Furthermore, why did the play disappear into obscurity after creating a tidal wave of attention?

Second, I am distracted by the holes, skips, and scrambles in the adaptation of Shakespeare's text, particularly as those aberrations regard female characters. Why is 1st Witch the only female of the three? What does her age, experience, and gender signify among the other witches, who are identified as male radicals? Why don't Lady MacBird's scenes follow the sequence Shakespeare provides for Lady Macbeth; why does Lady MacBird reappear after her sleepwalking; and why do Lady MacBird's daughters replace her in the banquet scene? Why do the female characters fall silent and disappear before the conclusion of the play? These questions have captivated me from the beginning of my examination of *MacBird!*, and since delving into the text and the play's historical archives, the questions have multiplied far beyond these.

My investigation into the marginal appearances and the erasures of female presence in the text of *MacBird!* has delivered fulfillment in the same way my attention to Shakespeare's marginalized female characters in *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and other Shakespeare plays have paid off, as I indicate in my chapter on feminist adaptations of canonical works. Feminist Shakespeareans often claim that there is meaning in lack, invisibility, disappearance, and silence of the female in canonical texts and practices

around the canon, and so it is with Garson and her play; the array of female characters in *MacBird!,* and the women they represent in the historical context of the Sixties, presents a rich opportunity for feminist exploration.

MacBird! is crucial in feminist theater history because:

1) The play offers a unique window into the cusp of the modern women's movement as it emerged from the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left. *MacBird!* was an overwhelmingly successful play, written by one of the few female adaptors of Shakespeare during the Sixties theater revolution, which impacted and influenced publishing, politics, and theater in the United States and internationally.

2) The text itself exemplifies feminist adaptation in its redemption of vilified female characters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and in the ways in which it characterizes, confronts, and condemns the powerful patriarchy that controlled the United States in the decade from which feminism as we know it arose.

3) The play deserves recognition in the realm of women's art because notable women of theater were involved in its productions. In addition to Barbara Garson, whose accomplishments as a playwright, author, and activist have continued throughout the decades since the Sixties, other renowned women who had a hand in *MacBird!* included theater agent and author Toby Cole, who represented Garson and her play; director Joan Littlewood, who directed the London production of *MacBird!*; and actor Rue McClanahan, who created the role of Lady MacBird.

Peri-feminism

The brief period during which *MacBird!* was written and produced, 1965-1968, was liminal in terms of our contemporary feminism. Alice Echols points out that the very first women's liberation groups were only beginning to form in 1968 (5). Historically, then, I cannot categorize *MacBird!*, or Garson's impulses and intentions in the piece, as proto-feminism, pre-femism, or feminism. Instead, I prefer to coin the term peri-feminism, by which I mean *around or near* feminism. Women like Garson were experiencing something they could not identify except in retrospect. We enter the discussion now with the advantage of retrospect, but we must be cautious that our hindsight about feminism does not block understanding of the significance of a text, a playwright, and a historical event called *MacBird!*.

Part II of my dissertation will consist of two chapters:

Part II, Chapter 3: Contextual Feminist Critique of *MacBird!*

Here I conduct a critical historical/textual—or contextual—analysis of *MacBird!*, revealing it to be a window into the emergence of the modern women's movement out of the radical movements of the Sixties; a redemptive re-imagination of Shakespeare's vilified female characters in *Macbeth*; and an all-out attack on patriarchal power in the Sixties U.S. government.

Part II, Chapter 4: *MacBird!*: A Peri-feminist Model of Feminist Theater Praxis

This chapter argues in three sections that *MacBird!* predates and prefigures feminist praxis in Shakespeare adaptation. Beginning with a comparative study of the representation of Lady Macbeth in *MacBird!* and representations of the

character in other prominent *Macbeth* adaptations of the period, I demonstrate that Garson's redemptive version contrasts sharply with those of the male theater practitioners whose interpretations extra-vilify the central female character even beyond the traditional shrewish interpretation of her, based on Shakespeare's text, and reduce her to a sexual object of male gaze, or marginalize her altogether. I shift from there to an examination of Garson's methods alongside other/later feminist adaptations of canonical works and argue for *MacBird!'s* position as a precursor of feminist rewrites. The final section of the chapter, which concludes my dissertation, culminates in an interrogation and celebration of the four extraordinary women of theater whose efforts intersected dramatically and problematically in *MacBird!*; they deserve recognition for this and their many other accomplishments as female theater practitioners, and their presence and involvement in *MacBird!* provides more conclusive evidence that the play figures prominently in feminist theater history.

Chapter Three

The Witch, the Lady, and the Patriarchs: A Textual and Historical Examination of the Emergence of Contemporary Feminism in Barbara Garson's Radical Play

"Men set the political agenda because, well, they knew about politics. Women did the mimeographing and coffee-making because, well, women always did such things." (Ruth Rosen, The World Split Open)

MacBird!'s plot is, roughly, *Macbeth's* plot. Its characters are based on characters from *Macbeth*. Its language is an amalgam of Shakespearean quotations and conventions that are at times parodied, but are also often delivered straight. Echoing *Macbeth's* paradoxical theme, one could say that *MacBird!* is and is not Shakespeare. You could also say that the character of MacBird is the character of Macbeth, and he is also Lyndon Johnson. As a close adaptation of *Macbeth*, *MacBird!* is male-centric—a satirical attack on male politicians, based on a Shakespearean tragedy whose protagonist is male.

In her article on silenced and dead female characters in Shakespeare, Carol Chillington Rutter writes, "As everyone knows, men have more to say in Shakespeare than women do. To concentrate criticism on words, on Shakespeare's playtext, then, is to concentrate on men" (xiv). Rutter argues that "until the text [Shakespeare] didn't write down—the performance text—is recuperated, re-imagined, put back into play and accounted for by spectators, we're reading only half Shakespeare's play" (xv) and insists

> Reading performance texts means reimagining the canon, opening up its supplementary physical, visual, gestural, iconic texts, making more space for the kind of work women do in play (particularly as Shakespeare situates their roles to play off men) . . . It means registering and fixing

> scrutiny on the woman's body as bearer of gendered meanings—meanings that do not disappear when words run out or characters fall silent. (xv)

MacBird!'s female characters do all of the things Shakespeare's characters do, short of dying: they defer and pander to men, they connive and scheme, they go crazy, they fall silent and disappear. They get erased.

In my examination of *MacBird!*, I have applied Rutter's method, as well as Dymphna Callaghan's, whose book, *Shakespeare Without Women*, examines "what, or rather who, is not there on Shakespeare's stage" in her quest to find "what complex admixture of elements—including sympathetic representation, misrepresentation, non-representation, and, crucially, the structural effects of mimesis itself—constitutes the absence" of [women and other marginalized] groups (2). I, too, have scouted for meaning in the female characters' absence and silence as much as I have pored over the readable, visible text. In the gaps I have discovered meanings that place *MacBird!* in a unique position of intersection amid history, feminist theater, and canonical literature.

The following textual/historical critique will be handled not chronologically, but in three major sections entitled The Witch, The Lady, and The Patriarchs. In the first section I discuss Garson's remaking of Shakespeare's witches in terms of feminist revisionist adaptation. I also show the ways in which 1st Witch represents Garson and other women of her ilk who worked deferentially with male leaders in the Sixties Civil Rights and New Left organizations, generally known as the Movement, at the critical moment preceding the modern women's movement. In the second section, I examine the re-making of Lady Macbeth through the creation of the character of Lady MacBird and

contend that, in spite of the author's own regret for having "left her as [she] found her" in Shakespeare's original play (E-mail 21 Nov. 2007), Lady MacBird is a redeemed version of Lady Macbeth, which exonerates Lady Bird Johnson because although the character does go through a process of villainy-to-insanity similar to Lady MacBeth's, she does so with the insertion of an important scene that depicts her as pursuant of peace. And in the third section, I argue that Garson's overall attack on U.S. leadership with its hegemonic, hierarchical value systems regarding class, race, and gender is an essentially feminist action that confronts a patriarchal system, implicit in which is the subjugation and marginalization of women and other oppressed people. Taken all together, the three sections will present *MacBird!* as a peri-feminist performance text.

As the plot of *MacBird!* follows the plot of *Macbeth*, it also follows the events surrounding JFK's assassination quite closely with lookalike characters who stand in for President Johnson, Lady Bird Johnson, the Kennedys, and other political figures, as well as stereotyped and stock characters that flesh out Garson's approximation of the contemporary scene. Witches in the form of marginalized radical activists prophesy to MacBird that he will become President; MacBird becomes Vice President, and he and Lady MacBird conspire together to assassinate the current leader, John Ken O'Dunc, when he visits them on their home turf; MacBird succeeds John Ken O'Dunc as President and proceeds to escalate the "Viet Land" war; other contemporary United States leaders, such as Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson (The Egg of Head) and Chief Justice Earl Warren (The Earl of Warren) are parodied in ensuing scenes as the Ken O'Duncs fret over MacBird's ascendency to head of state, and MacBird descends

more and more deeply into his arrogance and self-deception; Lady MacBird goes insane and drops out of the action as her husband nears his tragic end; MacBird seeks counsel from the witches again, who prophesy in "double-tongue" his downfall; MacBird faces his enemies and dies; and Robert Ken O'Dunc, Malcolm-like, ends the play with the promise of a new order. Interlaced throughout the text are direct quotations and parodic riffs on various Shakespeare plays and other canonical works, all written in Elizabethan dramatic style with anachronistic, contemporary Sixties references that were familiar to the public.

MacBird! starts with a Shakespearean-sounding, blank-verse prologue delivered by "a man dressed in standard business attire except for a plume in his hat and a toy sword at his waist" (1). The language of *MacBird!'s* prologue echoes that of *Henry V's*, "O for a muse of fire" (Prologue 1), but Garson's subversive use of the canon in the pages to come is signaled from the outset with the words, "O for a fireless muse" (1). The anachronistic imagery and playful twist on familiar Shakespearean text in the prologue set a satirical tone and promise a full-out attack on "our warlike leaders" in general, and specifically on the Johnson and Kennedy families, who are referred to as "two warring dynasties" (1).

The Witch

". . . the women's movement took much from the civil rights movement, from the new left, from the anti-war movement. But we brought it home. We brought it into the kitchen, we brought it into the bedroom, we brought it into the most personal and intimate aspects of people's lives. It was hard to deny there. It was hard to ignore those issues." (Berkeley)

The Sixties in the United States was a decade replete with war, metaphorical and real, domestic and abroad. There was the war in Vietnam, which sparked conflict

stateside between the political Left and Right. There was also the all-out war being fought on U.S. soil for Civil Rights, which created schisms between and within the Left and Right. And within these factions, unrest and division increased. Black Civil Rights leaders argued within their ranks over strategies regarding violence versus non-violence and questioned the relative merits of working with whites or separately from them. The Old and New Left disagreed similarly with one another regarding tactics. Eventually, women entered the fray (Rosen 124-5). Throughout most of the decade, the modern women's movement had yet to be defined or organized, but women were in a twilight phase of radical awakening. Some, like *MacBird!'s* author, Barbara Garson, were distancing themselves from traditional women's roles. Ruth Rosen describes that time for women such as Garson who were "shaking off the dust and detritus" of the 1950s and entering the Movement through the radical organizations that were cropping up on campuses nationwide.

> "The movement," as it came to be called, not only included the civil rights, student, and antiwar movements, but also a network of friendships, sexual partners, spouses, and communal living arrangements in which the alienated daughters of the fifties had taken refuge. For many young women, it would be an agonizing decision to leave this political community. It meant rupturing years of personal ties to a subculture that, at its most idealistic moments, saw itself as the redeemer of a nation poisoned by racism, materialism, and imperialism. What fueled their exodus was the ridicule and humiliation they experienced from men in the

> civil rights movement and then in the New Left and antiwar movements who could not—or would not—understand that the women's liberation movement would expand the very definition of democracy. What made it possible was that many of these movements had already begun a downward spiral into self-destruction. (Rosen 94-5)

As Rosen's encapsulation of women's entry into and exit from the Left indicates, involvement in the Movement was problematic, at once freeing and oppressing women. In the prologue of her book, *Daring to Be Bad*, Alice Echols explains the ironic position in which women in the Movement found themselves: "These movements . . . gave white women the opportunity to develop [political] skills and to break out of confining, traditional roles" (26), yet "at the same time that the Movement was building women's self-confidence and giving them opportunity to break out of stultifying roles, it was, paradoxically, becoming a less congenial place" (29) as women began to see that the egalitarian ideals the Movement was based on were not being applied to gender. In this way, the Movement both inspired and incited women eventually to pull out of the Left and organize around women's equality.

Retrospectively, it is plain to see that Garson's identity and experience are inseparable from the play, *MacBird!*, as my analysis will show. In her dissertation, "Autobiography, Adaptation, and Agency: Interpreting Women's Performance and Writing Strategies through a Feminist Lens," Elizabeth Lee-Brown looks at the ways women's reinterpretations of their personal experiences "historicize the past, and the ways in which women writers and playwrights use individual experiences to

communicate more inclusive experiences of national and cultural exile." She identifies "feminist agency as a series of possible and potentially transformative interpretations that an artist, both intentionally and unintentionally, makes available to an audience or reader(s)" (53-4). Garson's autobiographical presence in *MacBird!* exemplifies Lee-Brown's model, particularly since Garson never consciously intended *MacBird!* to be a feminist piece (11 Feb. 2008), nor does the play present overt messages regarding women's issues. But upon inspection, the play points undeniably to the radical women's movement that was rumbling beneath the surface of the culture in which Garson lived and worked. I here assert that Barbara Garson, as an active participant of the Movement, from which the modern women's movement sprang, unconsciously alludes to, supports, glimpses, and prefaces the then-emergent modern women's movement in her play.

As in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the action of *MacBird!* begins with the three witches, but in Garson's tale they meet not amid thunder and lightning, but in a hotel corridor at the 1960 Democratic presidential convention. Instead of the traditional bearded crones in Shakespeare's text, the witches are described as "a student demonstrator, beatnik stereotype," "a Negro with the impeccable grooming and attire of a Muhammad Speaks[7] salesman," and "an old leftist, wearing a worker's cap and overalls [carrying] a lunch pail and a lantern" (3). It is implied that the 1st Witch is female because 3rd Witch refers to her as "sister" (7), and cartoon illustrations by artist Lisa Lyons show

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[7] A radical newspaper published in Chicago by the Nation of Islam, *Muhammad Speaks* featured advertisements from local black businesses. "During the 1960s . . . *Muhammad Speaks* was a fixture in many black urban communities; almost daily, one saw immaculately dressed Black Muslims selling the newspaper" (Farrar).

2nd *and* 3rd Witches to be males (78, 92). In this section, I argue that Garson's adaptive choices regarding the witches serve two feminist purposes: to redeem the historically and misogynistically vilified female characters in Shakespeare's text by giving them reasonable and virtuous motivation; and to present a foil to the traditional roles of women in the Sixties in the character of 1st Witch, who, like Garson herself, fought alongside male activists in the radical movement of the Sixties.

The witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* present a challenging duality for feminist scrutiny. On the one hand, these characters are vindictive and supernaturally evil, based on the widespread misogynist European witch craze during which "the king for whom Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, James VI of Scotland and I of England, hunted, tried, and tortured witches and launched the witch craze in Scotland. Shakespeare's portrayal of witches reinforces James's agenda and the entrenched cultural beliefs of that period: females were easily swayed to join the ranks of Satan, particularly those who were poor and old, and witches were mischievous and powerful" (Todd vii). On the other hand, the witches are powerful antagonists to the villainous Macbeth; they are instrumental in destroying him and indirectly ushering in a corruption-free, non-dictatorial order in the play. In *MacBird!*, the witches serve a similar purpose and inarguably function as the antiheroes of the play.

In her book on Shakespeare adaptations, or "transformations," *Talking Back to Shakespeare*, Martha Tuck Rozett notes the unprecedented positive light Garson shed upon her witches and implies that the playwright set a trend for them "to be singled out and afforded star treatment" in subsequent interpretations and adaptations of *Macbeth*.

Rozett compares Garson's remarkable and groundbreaking take on the witches to Terry Eagleton's, who in 1986 dubbed the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* heroines on the basis that they expose society's hierarchal structures, oppressiveness, and warring ways. Rozett takes it upon herself to elevate Garson, and to level Eagleton for presenting his interpretation as though it were a radical discovery: "The only major difference between Eagleton in 1986 and Garson in 1966—and it is an important one—is that Garson preceded the feminist consciousness-raising that grew out of the student radicalism and civil rights movement of the sixties" (121). Rozett's point that it was Garson who first radicalized the witches without the advantage of hindsight and feminist trailblazing is well taken as she proceeds:

> Eagleton, writing with all of the confidence of a successful male academic theorist, can inscribe his witches with the positive female qualities celebrated by post-1970 feminism, while as a Marxist, characterizing them as "radical separatists who scorn male power." Garson, by contrast, deliberately made her witches both male and female, perhaps to avoid the negative stereotypes of witches-as-women. (121)

As Rozett indicates, historical context—particularly in terms of the feminist movement—has much to do with Garson's choices regarding the witches.

Rozett's conjecture that Garson sought to avoid associating evil with women may be valid, but the playwright's choice to make the witches both male and female serves an even deeper purpose than Rozett identifies. Throughout the play, the existence of 1st Witch as the sole female in the ensemble presents an astounding window into the very

moment of the emergence of the women's movement from Sixties radicalism. The character is obviously autobiographical, for her stated identity as a female "student demonstrator, beatnik stereotype" matches playwright Garson's identity at the time of the play's creation. Garson has commented that the sketched illustration of 1st Witch in the published script resembled her physically as well (Telephone interview 11 Feb. 2008); artist Lisa Lyons apparently felt that the correlation between the character and the playwright was a given. In Lyons' drawing, 1st Witch looks like the very image of women in the New Left emerging from traditionalism, who sported a casual look: pants and straight, un-coifed hair (78) instead of the stiffly hair-sprayed bouffant worn by mainstream women in the Sixties. Lyons' depictions of 1st Witch and Lady MacBird, in fact, contrast sharply and illustrate clearly Ruth Rosen's description of how women's fashion had changed "as their sense of entitlement had grown":

> Outward appearance told part of the story. They had replaced matronly shirtwaists, tight undergarments, teased and sprayed hair, and heavily made up faces with miniskirts, bell-bottom pants, granny glasses, long, dangling earrings, unshaved bodies, long, straight hair, little or no underwear; and faces without makeup. (94)

Lady MacBird appears in a cartoon drawing corseted Elizabethan-style, yet wearing the inevitable Sixties bubble-cut hairdo and pearl earrings (21).

Garson, a hip, twenty-four-year-old graduate student, was deeply involved in socialist causes and radical activism. The uncanny connection between the plot of Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, and events surrounding Kennedy's assassination occurred

to her in 1965 when she made a slip of the tongue, accidentally referring to then-First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson, as Lady MacBird, while speaking at an anti-Vietnam War demonstration at the University of California at Berkeley (Garson ix) where Garson was a member of various radical organizations.

Evidence of the importance of the witches and their relationship to each other occurs at the very start of the play's action. It is here that Garson's own identity is established in the character of 1st Witch as a model or type of the New Left woman working among men in the civil rights and student radicalism of the Sixties. The beginning dialogue parodies that of the *Macbeth* witches:

> 1st WITCH: When shall we three meet again?
>
> 2nd WITCH: In riot!
>
> 3rd WITCH: Strike!
>
> 1st WITCH: Or stopping train? (3)

Unlike any of the other female figures who appear as characters or are referred to in the play, 1st Witch is out in the world working alongside men and challenging patriarchal authority. But although she is in the public, male world rather than behind closed doors, she still takes a deferential position in the triad initially, an apprentice in the ways of radical activism, learning from the experienced male activist witches. Her first lines in the play are distinguishable from theirs because she speaks in questions. She asks, "When shall we three meet again?" to which the male witches answer exclamatorily: "In riot! / Strike!" But 1st Witch is not so confident; she responds interrogatively with, "Or stopping train?" (3) indicating her unsure position as subordinate to the older, seasoned witches. In

spite of her youth and inexperience, however, she becomes more enthusiastic as the scene ends, shouting "to meet with . . . MacBird!" (4).

The witches next appear in a scene that corresponds with the first prophecy scene in *Macbeth* (I.iii). The trio update each other, with the Negro 2nd Witch, representing Civil Rights upheaval, reporting on activities alluding to the Watts riots where

> It's wondrous warm,
> And all the world's abroad, out laughin', boppin'.
> A joyful throng comes pouring out of doors
> A brick in either hand—they're goin' shoppin'.
> O blessed, blessed blaze, the land's alight!
> And I have never seen so sweet a sight. (7)

1st Witch, representing the New Left, reports an incident that refers to the Berkeley troop train demonstrations, during which Garson's fellow student protestors in the Vietnam Day Committee regularly organized public protests as Vietnam-bound troops rode chartered trains through the city's seldom-used railroad track to Oakland Army Base (Rorabaugh 93):

> A troop train taking men to Viet Land
> Came chugging, chugging, chugging through our town.
> "Halt ho!" quoth I, and stood upon the track,
> Then tossing leaflets, leaped up to the troops:
> "Turn back, turn back and stop this train.
> Why fight for them and die in vain?"

But we were few and so did fail:

Shoved off the train, we went to jail.

Yet trouble stirred is always for the good. (8)

Here 1st Witch's identity as female and junior are established when 3rd Witch replies, referring to her as sister, saying, "Young witch, it's time you learned these lasting lessons" (8), and launches into a humorous, Old Leftist's version of the sage advice Polonius gives to Laertes in *Hamlet* (I.iii.58-80). Interestingly, 1st Witch is quite verbal at this moment; this is the most she will speak in the whole play. For now she is emerging among ring leaders in the Movement, but as quickly as she rises from tentativeness to confidence, she retreats again. During the prophecies in this and ensuing scenes the male witches carry most of the dialogue while she stands in marginally.

This rapid progress from tentativeness to early confidence and back to reticence on the part of 1st Witch provides a significant, encapsulated glimpse into the world of female radical activists of the Sixties movements. Women labored alongside men in such radical organizations as the Free Speech Movement (FSM), of which Garson was a founding member; the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); and a host of others, but were ironically, even in these Marxist-based organizations whose rhetoric promised equality, treated as second-class citizens on account of their sex. In her book, *The World Split Open*, Ruth Rosen charts the birth of the women's liberation movement and focuses its origin on SNCC and SDS workers, Casey Hayden and Mary King, whose observations of blatant sexism within the ranks of those movements prompted them to write documents of protest and call for

change.[8] Rosen has collected numerous firsthand experiences of these and other women who recall that on a typical day in these movements "men left to face the challenges and dangers of the outside world, while the women stayed inside tending the children, teaching students, or cleaning house" (104). King and Hayden's first list of complaints, which they issued to the SNCC, challenged "the unquestioned nature of informal male authority within the organization. Men dominated all the committees, farmed out most of the clerical work to women, and expected them to take the minutes at all meetings" (107). Disappointingly, in the SNCC, as in the SDS, women were ridiculed and debased by the male leaders of the organizations for raising the issue (117). Rosen explains:

> Many women in the New Left—not only in the SDS—felt intimidated by the movement world in which they lived but rarely starred. In contrast early male SDS leaders boldly expressed a sense of entitlement that had been part of their upbringing. They expected to be heard, even in Washington. [. . .] Looking back, Sue Thrasher, the first executive secretary of the Southern Student Organizing Committee, recalled, "The officers in SSOC were all men except me. It became clear to me that I was doing all the shit work, holding the office together, keeping the mailing and stuff like that going on." (116-17)

To perhaps a lesser extent, it was the same at Berkeley where *MacBird!'s* author, Barbara Garson, worked tirelessly in the Free Speech Movement (FSM), the activist

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[8] Written by Casey Hayden, "A Kind of Memo" was Hayden and King's collaborative manifesto that outlined women's grievances in SNCC and ignited the women's liberation movement (Rosen 112).

student organization that sparked Berkeley's legendary revolt in 1964 against the university administration, which had suddenly banned activists' proliferation of literature or solicitation of funds and support for their causes at card tables set up at the edge of campus (Rorbaugh 10). Regarding my fascination with *MacBird!*, Garson herself once asked me in a telephone interview why I consider *MacBird!* a feminist play. When I described my amazement at a young woman entering the male-dominated world of Sixties avant garde theater, she acknowledged that although women could "play with the boys back then" in the radical movements, they also had to do the women's work. Garson remembered those days well, when even at the nation's epicenter of Sixties revolution, she and other radical activists performed assumed gender roles in the FSM. Men and women alike labored to raise awareness, end the Vietnam War, and raise social consciousness in general, but the men tended to be more visible in leadership and speaking roles while the women took on more labor-intensive and behind-the-scenes tasks, such as printing flyers, making posters, setting up information tables, organizing rallies, and the like. Of Bettina Aptheker, one of FSM's founding leaders, Garson said, "Bettina did everything—everything the man would do and everything the woman would do. Bettina helped write the booklet, and get the booklet printed up and distributed, she did it all" (21 Sept. 2008).

Garson, though now recorded romantically by historian W. J. Rorabaugh as "propagandist" for the FSM (24), claims she attended to a more humble function: "I ended up running the press" (Telephone interview 11 Feb. 2008). Garson recalled the first time she became aware of women's unrest bubbling beneath the surface of the

movement. It was during a meeting, when a female member finally became enraged one night at being expected to get the coffee during FSM meetings. When asked to do so, the woman did get up and fetch someone's coffee, but upon her return from retrieving it, threw the full cup across the room and cried, "Is there any rule around here that says a man can't get his own coffee?" (Telephone interview 11 Feb. 2008).

Garson reflected on those days and said that she remembers doing what she could to include her husband in some way with the publishing and production of *MacBird!*; it was at that time "typical for the woman in the family to try to give credit to her husband for her accomplishments" (Telephone interview 11 Feb. 2008). Indeed, Garson's husband, Marvin, is credited in the foreword of the play text with the creation of Grassy Knoll Press during the time when no publisher would touch the subversively sensitive play (x). Marvin Garson often engaged in publication and production matters as *MacBird!* became an increasingly successful artistic and business venture. In a December 20, 1966 letter of dispute written to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, renowned author and co-founder of City Lights Booksellers & Publishers, Garson's husband took the stance of a chivalrous hero intervening for her: "I'm writing this instead of Barbara because 1) as publisher I'm the aggrieved party, and 2) Barbara can't take this kind of thing anymore" (4:41, City Lights Books Records). Marvin appears to have been involved in the business of the play from its outset, representing Barbara in the details of script negotiations abroad and correspondence with her agent and others (2: 7; 2: 20; 2: 24, Toby Cole Archives).

During one of our lengthy telephone interviews, Garson suggested that her marginalization as a woman in the Free Speech Movement somehow contributed to her impulse to write *MacBird!*: "If there hadn't been the barrier that I was unconscious of, maybe I would not have gone away into a corner to write my piece"; she would have been in the public eye instead. She contrasted her experience to that of Carl Oglesby, president of the SDS the same year Garson wrote *MacBird!*, whose oratory and organizational work kept him at the forefront of the New Left; she realized that if, like Oglesby's, her place in the movement had been visible, she might not have written the play. "The price Bettina paid," Garson reflected, "is that you could be one of the boys, or you could be a girl, but not both at that time." When asked if she had a conscious feminist agenda, Garson claims not to have been determining a path for women, but said, "I was representative of the time and women's changing roles; I managed to catch in a snapshot the change." Finally, Garson concluded that in spite of glass ceilings and other invisible obstacles for women during the era, "I jumped in not realizing I couldn't" (11 Feb. 2008).

Garson's characterization of 1st Witch is antithetical to the representations of more typical Sixties women represented in the play who are referred to in domestic contexts doing "woman's work," such as Lady MacBird playing the hostess (24), the American housewife cooking (35), the President's secretary reporting the arrival of a guest, or MacBird's daughters doing chores (58). The only mention of John Ken O'Dunc's wife or children happens in the assassination scene as parade onlookers watch the motorcade before O'Dunc's assassination: "This morning's paper showed his little girl / Dressed up in Mommy's shoes" (32). The notable exception to these trite

representations is 1st Witch, who serves as a foil to the status quo. This is particularly true in the case of 1st Witch's juxtaposition with MacBird's two unnamed daughters, indistinguishable from each other, who correlate with Lyndon Johnson's young adult daughters, Lynda Bird and Lucy Baines. Although they are in the same age bracket as 1st Witch, they are unlike her because they are firmly fitted in the mainstream patriarchal structure, as this analysis will later show, dutifully supporting their father at the height of his arrogance.

1st Witch presents an interesting foil to the daughters because she, too, is in a position of deference and support to the older, male witches. In some of the play's most powerful commentary on racism and patriarchy, which includes elements clearly adapted from the San Francisco Mime Troupe's 1965 *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*,[9] 2nd Witch applies white minstrel lips as he and the other two witches don skimmers and other minstrel show accessories, and take up a banjo and tambourine as they put on a black minstrel performance for MacBird and his guests. The female 1st Witch is cross-gender cast at this point, and takes on the role of interlocutor, which in traditional minstrel shows was a lead man in the center of the line who questioned the end men in the line. In classic minstrel style, 1st and 2nd Witches perform a comedic exchange that alludes to public suspicion that one of Lyndon Johnson's unmarried daughters was pregnant. The routine feeds problematically into patriarchal values associated with shame

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[9] According to the San Francisco Mime Troupe's current website, "In l965 . . . a racially mixed group of actors created *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights In a Cracker Barrel*, using an historically racist form to attack racism in both its redneck and liberal varieties" ("History").

regarding women's sexuality, yet at the same time, it also attempts to challenge and expose the presidential patriarch for hypocrisy:

> 2nd WITCH: Mr. Interlocutor, Mr. Interlocutor!
>
> 1st WITCH: Yes, Mr. Bones?
>
> 2nd WITCH: Mr. Interlocutor, hab you heard about dat sweet liddle birdie dat am gwine to hab a chile?
>
> 1st WITCH: What little bird is that, Mr. Bones?
>
> 2nd WITCH: Why de President's liddle girl. She gwine to get married right away.
>
> 1st WITCH: What are they going to call the child when it's born, Mr. Bones?
>
> 2nd WITCH: Dey gwine to call it Early Bird. Yeah! (93)

The ad hominem attack on Johnson—whose young daughter's sudden announcement of marriage apparently blurred the personal and political, raised puritanical red flags, and sparked assumptions about the need for a "shot-gun wedding"—is reinforced in a line from the subsequent chorus, adapted from "Massa's in de Cold, Cold Ground," and alluding to the assassination of JFK: "Ober de nation / Hear dat mournful sound / Chickens coming home and roosting / Massa's in de cold cold ground" (93). The entire exchange, while witty and apt, is at odds with the image and character of 1st Witch as foil to conventional images and assumptions regarding women, and yet she is complicit in it. The joke is a low blow by any standards, and by today's feminist standards, it is

unacceptable.[10] But Garson was basing her satire on the daily news, compiling stories and editorials into a cohesive critique (Aarons). The playwright told it as she saw it according to the word on the street. Incidentally, both of Johnson's daughters married during his presidency, but conclusive evidence of their gestational status at the time remains, appropriately, private and inconclusive.

In keeping with Garson's "snapshot" brevity in conveying the condition of women in the New Left, 1st Witch's collusion with the male witches soon ends, poignantly, at the close of the scene. The witches finish their minstrel show, referring in the chorus to "de Macky Bird . . . singing / Happy as de day is long" while "Round de nation am a ringing / De darkies mournful song" of their loss of John Ken O'Dunc, "so young and strong," who is now "Sleeping in de cold cold ground" (94). MacBird dismisses the Witches' performance, and in accordance with the plot of *Macbeth*, O'Dunc appears, Banquo-like, to haunt him (III.iv). MacBird's mad behavior in response to the ghost brings the party to an abrupt end. The guests leave and "Daughters help MacBird stagger off," leaving the three witches on stage (95).

It is here that we glimpse in the literary context of *MacBird!* the parting of ways of various organizations and interests in the Movement, including, it would seem, women from the male leaders with whom they worked who dominated them. In this symbolic

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[10]At the writing of this dissertation, Vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin had just been obliged to announce that her 17-year-old daughter was pregnant, but was quick to add that the teen was planning to marry the biological father. It says much about the severity of backlash against feminism and sexuality that the United States public would still, forty years after Johnson's presidency, consider the out-of-wedlock pregnancy of a public servant's child as relevant to that candidate's credibility.

moment in the play, the male 2nd and 3rd Witches both express jubilance, sharing the line, "I'll drink to that myself. O wondrous scene!" Their metrical completion of a single line of iambic pentameter signals unity. But 1st Witch delivers the next line quite distinctly and apart, in disagreement and disappointment: "I found it low, pathetic, and obscene." The other witches seem fueled by the work they've done, as evidenced by substantially long, fervent exchanges, but 1st Witch says little, and what she does say carries a discouraged tone. In response to 3rd Witch's diatribe against the "Bobcat" (Bobby Ken O'Dunc) and politicians in general, 1st Witch shruggingly replies, "And they all wanna help, 'but of course it takes time'" (98). She only responds one last time to 3rd Witch's Old Left rhetoric, saying, "We know, we know" (99). Then, reminiscent of female characters in several Shakespeare plays, 1st Witch falls silent amid the male characters' banter,[11] perhaps indicating regret for her complicity in the performance and exasperation with the male-dominated system. The males split finally and philosophically from each other as well, as 2nd Witch cries, "Damn this prayin' and pleadin' and non-violent slime. / I'm off my knees; man, you've used up your time," (98) to which 3rd Witch raises his lantern in protest to his comrade's violent impulse. 3rd Witch wrests the lantern and sets the stage afire, shouting, "I'm through with your snubs and I'm through with your spurn. / I'm through with you, whitey—so burn, baby, burn!" (100). Implicit in this scene is not only a foretelling of the demise of Johnson's reign, but also the demise of unity in the Movement.

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[11]Examples of silent/silenced female characters among male characters in solidarity can be seen in the final scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Love's Labor's Lost*.

The witches represent the splintering that Garson was no doubt beginning to witness; the various organizations could not sustain unity because although their causes and concerns were similar, their particular issues could not be addressed generally. Since 1st Witch is female, she can be seen as representative not only of the New Left rejecting the Old Left, and the New Left having been rejected by the Civil Rights Movement as part of Black separatism, but she also stands in as a model of New Left women (and, as it turns out, specifically white women) who became discouraged with the entire Movement, including the male-dominated New Left, and split off to form the Women's Liberation movement.

An important feature of my feminist analysis of *MacBird!* is to investigate female silence and invisibility. Since those in the Movement who were perhaps most silenced and marginalized were Black women, I must note that while the Black male witch figures prominently in Garson's plot about the splitting of the Movement (which is representational of Black separatism), the play does not even hint at the presence of Black women in the Civil Rights movement. This is not surprising because part and parcel of the surge of Black Power was that while Black men gained more agency, Black women became increasingly oppressed among men of their own race. In her memoir/essay, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," Michele Wallace recalls,

> It took me three years to fully understand that Stokely [Carmichael] was serious when he'd said my position in the movement was "prone," three years to understand that the countless speeches that all began "the Black man . . ." did not include me. I learned. I mingled more and more with a

> Black crowd, attended the conferences and rallies and parties and talked with some of the most loquacious of my brothers in Blackness, and as I pieced together the idea that was being presented for me to emulate, I discovered my newfound freedoms being stripped from me, one after another. (6)

The plight of Black women would be complicated and perpetuated, as they would also be misrepresented in, and excluded from, the white-led Women's Movement where issues regarding women's rights, needs, and ideologies were based on those of middle-class white women. But the ramifications of that "rub" would not begin to be fully addressed until after the Women's Liberation Movement was in full sway. There in the dawn of peri-feminism, racial strife among women was rumbling, especially as white women entered the Civil Rights Movement in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, but male oppression appeared to be of more obvious and immediate concern. Although the injustices exercised against women took different forms, depending on their race, both Black and white women suffered from sexist double standards at the hands of male leaders (Rosen 103-10).[12]

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[12] See Michele Wallace's essay, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood" (Hull, et. al.) for a firsthand account of the typically intensified marginalization of African-American women during the splintering of the radical movements. The title of the anthology in which Wallace's piece is published says it all: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Black women activists in the Movement were represented in neither the Civil Rights Movement nor the women's movement. Wallace recalls that during her participation in the National Black Theatre, she "was told of the awful ways in which Black women, me included, had tried to destroy the Black man's masculinity; how we had castrated him; worked when he didn't work; made money when he made no money; spent our nights and days in church praying to a

It is therefore understandable (albeit ironic) that the U.S. women's movements, including Black feminism and the women's liberation movement, emerged from male-led Sixties organizations such as the SDS and SNCC, two closely associated radical anti-Vietnam anti-war groups. It is understandable because the women immersed in those movements were learning rhetoric, strategies, and theories of activism and Marxism; they were themselves armed with those tools to fight for the rights of disenfranchised groups. The irony is that at the same time they were struggling alongside the male leaders of those organizations, they were themselves also being oppressed on the basis of their sex. In her chapter entitled, "Leaving the Left," Ruth Rosen writes, "Many women in the New Left—not only in the SDS—felt intimidated by the movement world in which they lived but rarely starred" (116). Similarly, Barbara Epstein of the SDS said that when she raised the issue of women's inequality in the movement, she was ridiculed (117).

To understand the peri-feminist climate in which *MacBird!* was created and flourished, it is necessary to go back to the stories of women in the Movement. The 1990 film documentary, *Berkeley in the Sixties*, features interviews with women who, like Barbara Garson, were there. Taken together, their firsthand accounts provide a collective narrative. Ruth Rosen describes excitement at the beginning of the movements, before female oppression began to surface: "I felt that the world was unraveling, that history had

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jive white boy named Jesus while he collapsed into alcoholism, drug addiction, and various forms of despair; how we'd always been too loud and domineering, too outspoken." Wallace claims that "the message of the Black movement" was that Black women needed to be beautiful, obedient, and silent supporters of their men. Of Stokely Carmichael's quip, Wallace writes "the 'new Blackness' was fast becoming the new slavery for sisters" (9). The Black men she knew "seemed totally confounded when it came to treating Black women like people."

speeded up, that the world was swirling around me. The Movement had expanded, the anti-war movement was immense, the whole Movement had begun. The world simply was undergoing change at a rate that I could hardly comprehend." Another interviewee, Suzy Nelson, furthers the plot as she recollects, in the midst of the excitement, the disappointment, disillusionment, and betrayal she and other women sensed when "our [male] comrades" rejected their suggestions for more meaningful involvement:

> We looked at them and we said, what, how can they do this to us? You know, these are our brothers. Why aren't they interested in what we have to say? They're only interested in, you know, the fact that we're always there for them. And we always make the coffee and we run off the leaflets, and we make all the telephone calls late into the night . . . yet when we try to take part in a more active level, we meet resistance. (*Berkeley*)

Susan Griffin describes her memory of the dawn of the women's movement, as it emerged from the Movement, as a change from solitary dissatisfaction to the formation of a sisterhood, in which "everybody is speaking about it; I have women who agree with me everywhere . . . Everything in my life that has disturbed me is being challenged; things that haven't disturbed me before, suddenly I look at and they do disturb me" (*Berkeley*).

Rosen sums up what I am calling the the peri-feminist era as "the logical and maybe even inevitable conclusion of the Sixties" because "throughout the Sixties we were trying to imagine how to live differently, how to change the world" (*Berkeley*).

Among *MacBird!'s* many contributions to feminist theater history is Garson's inclusion of her own youthful, radical, female identity as representative of those women

who eventually emerged from the Left. Garson, the author, through 1st Witch, subconsciously interprets for us throughout the play the experience of the female radical activist in the peri-feminist pre-dawn of women's liberation. She is a silenced underling whose subordination is taken for granted and whom the protagonist patriarch refers to as "a filthy beatnik." *MacBird!* does not recognize her gender, which may indicate that Garson does not either, at least consciously. But there she is, a conflated representative of the New Left and Women's Liberation, both of which took their cues and learned from the Old Left and Civil Rights. In the play's fiery image of the Civil Rights Movement exploding and the Old Left fading, the New Left is also seen splitting along gender lines. But the most resonant feminist statement made in *MacBird!* is in Garson herself, whose real-life performance as the author, and as the obvious prototype for 1st Witch, infuses the play with an ethos of female genius and courage in the metamorphosis of women from oppression to liberation in U.S. society.

The Lady

Lady Bird Johnson, 1912 – 2007: Wife, mother, grandmother, conservationist, businesswoman, philanthropist, First Lady . . . Lady Bird Johnson is probably best known for her support of her husband's career. (Elizabeth Christian Associates, Public Relations)

Barbara Garson has expressed regret for her characterization of Lady MacBird. "I plead guilty," she has said, to placing Lady Bird in the position of Lady MacBird "just because she belongs in that space," and not because the character is a reflection of the real Lady Bird (Telephone interview 11 Feb. 2008). She says her parody is "fair to everybody except Lady Bird" (qtd. in Horwitz). In response to my first, introductory correspondence with Garson via email, she wrote, "since you describe yourself as a

feminist Shakespearian, let me start by confessing that the one person I didn't do justice to was Lady Bird. I feel I ennobled Johnson and gave the others at least their due. But I left Lady MacBird pretty much as I found her in MacBeth" (21 Nov. 2007).

I argue that Garson need not apologize and that her use of Johnson's wife as place-holder for Macbeth's wife is a given in terms of literary license for the purposes of the adaptation; it is not a personal attack on Lady Bird Johnson. Furthermore, the playwright's jabs at Lady Bird's Highway Beautification Campaign are appropriate in the context of political satire, in the same way that it was acceptable at the time to caricature the first lady's Texas accent. Beyond those conventional literary, satirical choices, I assert that Garson's overall depiction of Lady MacBird not only provides a redemptive version of Lady Macbeth, arguably the most misogynistically vilified female character in the Western canon, but it also distances Lady Bird Johnson from, and even sets her against, her husband's arrogant, unyielding position regarding international political aggression and domestic irresponsibility. Garson rewrites the character as a much more palatable, logical character than Lady Macbeth, who, in ambitious fervor, shames and demeans her spouse (I.vii.35-45), embraces supernatural evil (I.v.40-54), and conjures images of committing infanticide (I.vii.54-9). Lady MacBird's manipulative behaviors and involvement in the assassination are clearly intended to align the story of *Macbeth* with the political conditions of the Sixties; Garson has, from the beginning, stated publicly that she never bought into conspiracy theories about the JFK assassination and had no intention of accusing either of the Johnsons of murder, but rather of patriarchal oppression and aggression (Horwitz). On that score, I might argue that some skepticism

regarding a first lady's motives is warranted; that a cunning politician such as Johnson would be supported by a similarly cunning wife seems a safe assumption and useful fodder for a political satirist. Most would agree that the wives who have advocated for and supported their husbands in powerful, patriarchal leadership are at least complicit in their husbands' actions. The depiction of Lady MacBird as calculating is not so much a specific critique of Lady Bird Johnson—whose reputation appeared to be spotless—or a criticism of women in general, as it is of cultures dominated by powerful, ambitious men whose wives, ideally, are the "woman behind the man."

Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth is an exaggeration of that ideal, an ideal which places women in a no-win position; the result of her limited agency in the husband's machinations leaves her, at best, in the role of helpmeet, and at worst in the role of scapegoat. Lady Macbeth is the female centerpiece of a play in which, as director Jules Wright has put it, "there is a complete denial of feminine principle; all the women are wiped out" (Schafer 153). In her essay, "Triple-Threat Shakespeare," Jeanne Addison Roberts refers to *Macbeth* as Shakespeare's most misogynistic play with "the choice of females [being] between a murderous wife, a victimized mother, and the conniving witches. Even Macduff, the savior of the country, must be distanced from female contamination by not being of woman born" (6). In her critique on Lady Macbeth, Roberts cites the character's shocking speech, in which Lady Macbeth describes a hypothetical dashing out of her own child's brains. Addison articulates the problematic binary in which Lady Macbeth exists as either villain or victim:

> Her speech not only establishes her horrible repressed violence; it also raises the intriguing question of what has happened to her child. Lady Macbeth certainly eggs her husband on, and readers often blame her for the murder. But her future is totally dependent on Macbeth. . . . she is essentially powerless in spite of her formidable sense of purpose. Once her husband has moved into a realm where she cannot follow, her life disintegrates into madness and suicide. Without him she has no self. (7)

Lady MacBird follows a similar trajectory, and does end in madness and "no self" status, but Garson's insertion of a crucial scene adds dimension to the character and creates her as an antihero who sees and foresees the horrible consequences of her husband's actions. In spite of Garson's regret about her depiction of Lady MacBird, much of my argument that *MacBird!* carries a significant feminist statement within the sociopolitical context of the Sixties lies in the playwright's re-imagination of Lady Macbeth through this redemption of Lady MacBird.

Lady MacBird first appears at the same plot point and in the same situation as Lady Macbeth, reading her husband's letter about the witches' prophecies (I.v), and this is no doubt a part of her representation of Lady Bird that Garson most regrets, for Lady MacBird is immediately presented as conniving in her monologue addressed to her absent husband:

> How often in the past have I arranged
> To have the right connections come your way,
> Myself performing all the devious acts

So you receive the bounty graciously.

How artfully you've learned to look away

While I prepare the props and set the stage. (20)

This is followed by MacBird's homecoming. Lady MacBird greets him with "All hail MacBird, the President to be!" and promptly hints at her usurping plot. When MacBird utters the lines identical to Macbeth's, "I dare do all that may become a man / Who dares do more is none" (I.vii.46-7), Lady MacBird replies, "I'm not a man. / I am a lady and a Southern hostess. With simple signs of hospitality / I mean to give our guests the warmest welcome" (22). Garson thus constructs the character as a Southern United States version of Shakespeare's calculating Lady Macbeth. It is here that Lady MacBird implies, although never expresses, her plan to "Just expose [John Ken O'Dunc]. Nothing more" to MacBird's "broad dominions [that] shelter not a few / Who'd show great force of feeling for their chief" (22). Her implied plan is to place John Ken O'Dunc in harm's way, among constituents that feel hostile to him and devoted to MacBird. The next time Lady MacBird surfaces in the text is on the day of John Ken O'Dunc's arrival, and reminiscent of Lady Macbeth, she is the driving force behind the murderous plot to usurp supreme power. MacBird echoes briefly Macbeth's uncertainty about the scheme, asking, "If we should fail?" (I.vii.59) to which Lady MacBird delivers her Garsonian equivalent to Lady Macbeth's "Screw your courage to the sticking place" speech:

We—fail?

The only danger lies in faltering.

The boldest deed, the biggest life wins out.

This lesson we have learned from Ken O'Dunc.

Remember he attacked the rebel isle,

Denied he did it, then announced: "Twas I"?

The major thing is confidence and style,

For still the world believes he'd never lie. (28)

She convinces her husband without the harsh whetting to which Lady MacBeth resorts, and promptly greets O'Dunc and his entourage who have just arrived at the MacBird ranch in a helicopter. Her welcome is typical of the self-deprecation and genteel phrasing associated with Southern hospitality:

Although this welcome's humble, be assured

We're honored to receive you at the ranch.

And simple folk throughout this ample state

Are clamoring to see you. So for them

This Friday noon we've planned a grand parade,

A fitting welcome, where the passionate throng

Will line the streets and fill the buildings round.

At doors and windows, yea, on chimney tops,

Their infants in their arms, like that they'll stand,

The livelong day with patient expectation

To see their leader pass the streets downtown.

And when they see your open carriage near,

They'll raise a din and universal shout. (30)

Lady MacBird's seductive imagery of crowd adoration flatters O'Dunc, and he readily agrees to stay until Friday.

The scene that immediately follows is an avant garde representation of the Kennedy assassination. Onlookers comment on the motorcade until a shot is heard, after which

> *a projector throws an X in a sixth-floor window of the [backdrop] building, trajectory lines extend from the building to the sidewalk, lettering appears, reading 'Grassy Knoll,' 'Railroad Overpass,' etc. In this way the backdrop becomes a newspaper diagram of the assassination scene*. (33)

Lady MacBird, among the onlookers, quotes the male character, Ross, from *Macbeth* when she asks the "Cop" character, "Is't known who did this more than bloody deed?" (II.iv.22). She cunningly leads the crowd, entreating, "Where is the viper? Bring the villain forth!" and presently faints, a deliberate act which, like Lady Macbeth's, "Help me, hence, ho!" (II.iii.117) is the first step in her erasure and which, ironically, ushers her husband into more presence and power. MacBird takes charge of the situation, announcing "Be calm, my friends; I speak as head of state" (36-7).

As in *Macbeth*, once MacBird has achieved his objective, and the Lady's role as initiator, plotter, and prodder is finished, he discards her, and she disintegrates into the madness and disappearance so typical of female characters in Shakespeare. But Garson's re-imagination of Lady MacBeth differs in noticeable ways which actor Rue McClanahan, creator of the role of Lady MacBird, found almost incomprehensible and

not at all in accord with Shakespeare's character arc of Lady Macbeth. In her recent autobiography, McClanahan recalls going to Garson for help:

> "Why did you scramble her part?" I asked the writer, hoping for some insight on how to play it. She replied, "Oh I just stuck the role in because it was necessary to include Lady MacBird. I didn't give it any thought. You figure it out." So I was on my own. [Nonetheless,] I got laughs and had a helluva good time in my chiffon dresses and Texas drawl. (136)

McClanahan's recollection corresponds with Garson's in this sense: Lady MacBird's function is to support the main character, MacBird. But from a feminist perspective, the outcome of Garson's unconscious or subconscious decisions regarding the character is in stark contrast to the outcome of Shakespeare's decisions regarding the Lady. One of the ways Lady MacBird's role is "scrambled" is that her sleepwalking scene occurs before the banquet scene. Another is that she remains absent at the banquet scene and is replaced by her two daughters. Perhaps most crucial in terms of Garson's remake of the character is her reappearance between those scenes in an exchange in which she recounts for MacBird the horrors of the state under his rule. As I will show, this re-ordering of the original text allows for crucial changes in the Lady's character development, making her vocal and resistant rather than silent and passive.

Lady MacBird's sleepwalking scene parodies Lady Macbeth's and presents a social critique of Lyndon Johnson's handling of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, an initiative led by Lady Bird Johnson which placed restrictions on signs and billboards along highways and "required certain junkyards along Interstate or primary highways to

be removed or screened and encouraged scenic enhancement and roadside development" (FHWA). By reliable accounts, Lyndon Johnson manipulated passage of the bill as a gift to Lady Bird.

Members of Congress went into session on October 7 to pass "this important but controversial legislation." The usual pressure to finalize the session was especially intense because members of Congress and their wives were to attend "a Salute to Congress event at the State Department auditorium and a White House reception" (FHWA). According to then-Speaker of the House, Jim Wright,

> "that night at the White House, all of the congressional wives [had] long since . . . gathered for the annual gala celebration, [and were] waiting, waiting, waiting; and 10 o'clock came, and 10:30 came, and the House was still in session-because he who was the manager of that bill, and the Speaker both had received a call from the White House, 'Do not bring those Members here until you've passed the Highway Beautification Act!'" (qtd. in FHWA)

Upon signing the bill into law, Johnson reportedly kissed Lady Bird on the cheek and handed the first pen to her. (FHWA)

Garson's re-imagination of the sleepwalking scene, then, becomes a parody in which Lady MacBird, in the presence of reporters, smells blood and attempts to cover it with the scent of flowers as she raves,

> Flowers by the roadside . . .
>
> . . . plant these flowers . . .

Let all the land be lined with living blooms.

Yet all the petals of a summer's roses

Can never sweeten this accursed land. (58)

It is here that Garson brings on caricatures of the Johnson daughters, Lynda Bird and Lucy Baines, shadowing their mother, who experiences olfactory hallucinations as she "sniffs around the room, gasping at a foul odor." They "press aerosol sprays" and explain her plight to their father:

DAUGHTER 1: She's been this way or worse for several days now.

DAUGHTER 2: We have to follow after her with Air-Wick,

For every several steps she stops and sniffs

And crying out, "There's blood upon this spot!",

She makes us spray to mask the phantom smell.

DAUGHTER 1: And everywhere she goes, she carries flowers.

DAUGHTER 2: The rooms are sickly sweet with perfumed plants.

DAUGHTER 1: I think our mother's finally flipped her lid. (57-8)

The daughters' disrespectful tone regarding their mother contrasts with their attitude toward their father when they later appear in a bizarre scene that conflates *Macbeth's* banquet scene and *Hamlet's* play-within-the play, "Mousetrap." Their dismissive attitudes, combined with MacBird's condescension, contributes to Lady Bird's isolation. MacBird tries to soothe and cover for her, saying,

Be calm, sweet bird. She's often like this . . .

nerves . . .

To ease your frenzied wits, we will decree

That all our highways shall be lined with flowers.

We will applaud the lofty dedication

With which you seek to beautify our nation. (58)

And with a tone as patronizing as Johnson's magnanimous public gift to his wife, MacBird dismisses Lady MacBird and the daughters with, "And now sweet woodchuck, charming chickadees, / Go chirping off and tend your household chores" (58).

Ensuing action involves Kennedy lookalikes, Bobby and Ted, in conversation with various senators, aides, and congressmen lamenting MacBird's rising tyranny and incompetence and plotting his overthrow. MacBird's Macbeth-like arrogance is seen at an all-time high in an exchange with his aide, Crony, as demonstrators shout from off-stage:

MACBIRD: Arrest them all! / I said arrest them all!

CRONY: There's news, more news!

MACBIRD: Spit out your spiteful news.

CRONY: Peace paraders marching.

MACBIRD: Stop 'em!

CRONY: Beatniks burning draft cards.

MACBIRD: Jail 'em!

CRONY: Negroes starting sit-ins.

MACBIRD: Gas 'em!

CRONY: Latin rebels rising.

MACBIRD: Shoot 'em!

CRONY: Asian peasants arming.

MACBIRD: Bomb 'em!

CRONY: Congressmen complaining.

MACBIRD: Fuck 'em!

Flush out this filthy scum; destroy dissent.

It's treason to defy your President. (73-4)

Significantly, unlike Lady Macbeth, who never again appears after her insane sleepwalking sequence, Lady MacBird does appear once more at this time, petitioning MacBird in a diatribe similar to that of Caesar's wife, Calpurnia. Calpurnia describes unnatural, "horrid sights" that have occurred throughout the city of Rome on what turns out to be the eve of Caesar's death: a lioness whelping in the streets, dead bodies exhumed from graves, bloody battles in the sky, and shrieking ghosts (*JC* II.ii.13-26). Lady MacBird's entreaty resembles this and other "Great Chain of Being" speeches in Shakespeare, wherein characters describe atrocities that have resulted from corruption or discord among the powerful, such as Ross's reports of unnatural occurrences in *Macbeth*—time going awry and horses eating each other as a result of Duncan's murder (II.iv.5-20)—or Titania's entreaty to Oberon, in which she argues that as divine rulers, their marital strife is throwing nature off-kilter (*MND* II.i.81-117).

Lady MacBird's monologue similarly enumerates contemporary problems and troubling images of the Sixties: first, darkness associated with the Blackout of 1965[13] and Johnson himself: "Last night the Eastern Kingdom blackened over. / The people feared a failure of the power, / And prophets cried with not-too-hidden meaning / That he with greatest power dwelt in darkness, / And darkness would descend upon his nation" (75); and then fire, associated with "a flickering draft card burned," and the image of Thich Quang Duc, the burning monk in the well known photograph that appeared in popular media during Johnson's administration (Alisimo).

Lady MacBird's speech evokes the idea of a modern-day Chain of Being, in which the arrogance of the powerful trickles down, causing chaos and horror. At the end of her admonition that her husband attend to the state of the nation, Lady MacBird cries "O God! God forgive us!" which echoes the words of the Doctor who, in *Macbeth*, observes Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking (V.i.75). Far from taking her words to heart, MacBird dismisses Lady MacBird's screed and responds to her with a plan to dupe the public, those "simple souls that see in black and white" by calling "a national day of prayer / We'll get the biggest preacher in the country. / You know the one I mean—the guy's got class. / We'll make it high-toned, dignified, and solemn; / Organs, choirs, pictures of me, ponderin'. / Now that's the sort of thing builds confidence" (76). The

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[13] The Great Northeast Blackout of 1965. On November 9, 1965, the electricity went out in Southern Canada and parts of the Northeast United States, including New York City and Boston. "At least 30 million people were caught in the dark shroud that spread into eight States and Ontario, Canada. In one of the greatest industrial complexes on earth, almost everything came to a standstill. Nobody panicked. But a shudder of foreboding raced across the United States and around the world" ("Great Blackout").

"guy" with class refers, no doubt, to Baptist Evangelist Billy Graham, who was one of LBJ's closest confidantes, and the "day of prayer" to Proclamation 3657, in which the President, who was at the time escalating the Vietnam war, designated "Memorial Day, Sunday, May 30, 1965, as a day of prayer for permanent peace" (Woolley). Lady MacBird's response to MacBird's dismissive reaction, and her last words, "Then pray for me, my lord" (76), redeem her. Lady MacBird's remorse resembles that of the passive, powerless end-of-play Lady Macbeth, whose heart is "sorely charged" in the sleepwalking scene (V.i.54); on the other hand, Lady MacBird is an articulate harbinger whose attempt to redirect her husband's misguided actions, although failed, shows strength and good intention.

The final references to Lady MacBird occur in the scene that corresponds with the *Macbeth* banquet scene. Here Garson situates the MacBird family and supporters in a jovial party "atmosphere [somewhere] between a western saloon and an Elizabethan tavern, with a player piano providing music" (89). MacBird excuses his wife's absence, announcing that she "keeps her state" (III.iv.5), just as Macbeth does in the original, but unlike Lady Macbeth, who shows up eventually to greet guests, Lady MacBird never arrives; instead, MacBird is flanked by his two young adult, adoring daughters who assume their mother's vacated position of Southern hostess and devotee of the patriarch. Their language and their liaison role simulate Lady Macbeth's as they negotiate between their father and his nonplussed guests, attempting to cover for their father's odd behavior when he sees the ghost of John Ken O'Dunc. The daughters say at various points, "Stay seated sirs. Our Dad is often thus. / The fit is of a moment. It'll pass"; "What folly is this,

father? Lords, sit down"; and "Oh stay, my lords. / (*To* MACBIRD:) Why do you make such movement? When all's done / You look but on a guest" (91, 94-5). The function of the daughters in the two scenes is similar; in both cases they are attending on a delusional parent. But whereas they display a begrudging, disrespectful, and flippant attitude about their mother's insanity, they willingly support and run interference for their father in his delusional state.

Lady MacBird's disappearance and displacement by her own daughters begs deep consideration in terms of feminist critique. This replacement of the mother, who in her previous and final scene unsuccessfully exhorts her husband with a litany of images that prophesy his and the country's undoing, by doting daughters who support his trajectory of corruption, is a strong commentary on patriarchal power over women. The daughters, as their mother before them, carry on in her stead to serve the status quo. Never mind that Lady MacBird's eyes are now open to the danger and folly of patriarchal ambition; her own daughters are groomed to pick up and bear the traditional duty of supporting male authority. It is noteworthy that 1st Witch is presented as a foil to the MacBird daughters—a woman of the same age who opposes the patriarchy. Yet problematically, and true to the situation of the radical Movement, 1st Witch also operates under male oppression among the very men who lead the movement against patriarchal power. To reiterate, Garson offers a stylized illustration of female relation to patriarchal power in these three images: the mother, the daughters, and the witch. The mother, in the form of Lady MacBird, sides with and promotes patriarchal power until she sees its danger and consequence; she attempts to undo the damage, but has no agency in the system; she

disappears, and is displaced by her daughters who reject her and embrace their father/patriarch, who now uses and oppresses them for his image and gain. The female witch is antithetical to them all, opposing the patriarchy; yet she is still oppressed by patriarchy even within the movements that ostensibly defy it.

Garson's handling of the Lady and 1st Witch offers arresting examples around discussions of female disappearance and silence in performance. Lady Macbird's disappearance is jolting as she is replaced by her daughters. Her vanishing can be seen as self-assertive. It is obvious that she can, if she will, attend the banquet with her husband and, by association with him, partake of the power and attention he derives from his powerful position—a position she is responsible for his acquiring. But rather than continue her trajectory of decreased agency in a situation she regrets, she opts out of the system altogether. Her disappearance signifies dissent and dissociation. It means something; it is more powerful than complicity.

Lady MacBird's strange disappearance draws scrutiny when juxtaposed, not only with Lady Macbeth, but with all the female characters in *Macbeth*. In her book, *Enter the Body*, Carol Chillington Rutter makes mention of Lady Macbeth, whose "ending, like the witches', is a weird vanishing, prepared for by that strange spectacle that embodies her absence, the sleepwalking" (17). To extrapolate beyond Rutter's observation, even Lady MacDuff, who is murdered along with her children and servants in the massacre of her entire household, "disappears" when her son is murdered on stage, urging her to flee; she exits, crying murder, and is not seen again. Although she is later reported dead, her embodied corpse never appears on the stage. The deaths of the female characters in

Macbeth are known only by report and remain shrouded in mystery: instead of "ocular proof" of their deaths, Ross conveys to Macduff that his "wife, and babes, [have been] / Savagely slaughter'd" (IV.iii.204-5). Underscoring this point is the somnambulant Lady Macbeth's puzzling rhyme about the mysterious disappearance of MacDuff's wife: "The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?" (V.i.42-3). At the end of the play, as Malcolm gives his inauguration speech, he uncertainly reports the demise of Macbeth's "fiend-like queen, / Who (as 'tis thought) by self and violent hands / Took off her life" (V.viiii.35-7). This absence of flesh-and-blood corpses removes concrete evidence of female death, placing *Macbeth's* women squarely within the play's paradoxical theme of "nothing is / But what is not" (I.iii.142). In a play that shifts responsibility from the male protagonist to its few female characters (the Witches instigate the tragedy with their enchanting prophecies, and Lady Macbeth fans the flames of ambition and plots Duncan's murder), disappearance reinforces the image of women as conniving, mysterious, and indomitable creatures.

In keeping with the *Macbeth* story, Garson's 1st Witch and Lady MacBird repeat the dying/disappearing/silent act so typical among Shakespeare's heroines. And yet, as I have shown, Lady MacBird's disappearance occurs only after she has pled her case and lost it. 1st Witch's silence is a brooding one that foreshadows women's liberation.

This idea played out in an interesting way in my most recent discussions with Barbara Garson. I asked her if, in addition to her autobiographical presence in the character of 1st Witch, she saw herself in Lady MacBird as well. We talked about the Lady's strange disappearance, and although the playwright does not recall her motive for

removing Lady MacBird from the banquet scene, she conjectured, "It's a refusal to be involved with it all; she can justify the original murder better than she can justify the way he's running the country." Then, in a curious shift from the character to herself, Garson said, "the original murder doesn't matter to me, but the way he's running the country is troublesome to me. She [Lady MacBird] has to excuse herself from this." Garson's response, which blurs the line between the author and the text, bolsters my assertion that, however subconsciously, something of female agency was being conveyed in her writing of *MacBird!*.

The Patriarchs

A feminist world-view will enable women and men to free their minds from patriarchal thought and practice and at last to build a world free of dominance and hierarchy, a world that is truly human. (Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy)

Subsequent to her examination of the history of patriarchy from its earliest beginnings, Gerda Lerner concludes, "Revolutionary thought has always been based on upgrading the experience of the oppressed," and in order to shift our consciousness toward new order, we must "step outside of patriarchal thought." Among the items in Lerner's list of what it means to step out of patriarchal thought is "Being skeptical toward every known system of thought; being critical of all assumptions, ordering values and definitions" (227-8). Lerner's great work in exhuming the roots of women's oppression has been useful in my understanding of the way in which general patriarchal power and class oppression, as seen in the political structure of the U.S. in the 1960s, and which Barbara Garson's *MacBird!* attacked, is intrinsically linked to women's oppression.

Linking these ideas about patriarchy and feminism to theater, Lisa Jeanne Wekerle's dissertation, "Revisioning Narratives: Feminist Adaptation Strategies on Stage and Screen" bases the definition of feminist theater and film on Lucy Fischer's model, which is "engaged in an argumentative discourse with patriarchal culture—in an ongoing critical 'debate'" (qtd. in Wekerle 7). Wekerle articulates further: "Women's theatre . . . is unified by the ways in which it has been positioned in opposition to patriarchal culture [which refers] to the complex systems of ideology which serve to perpetuate women's discursive and material oppression," and thus "a feminist adaptation either supports or resists the original text in such a way that questions patriarchal ideology" (7). Because of Garson's head-on attack of patriarchy, the play fits firmly within Wekerle's criterion; in addition to the ways in which Garson re-tells the stories of female characters in the play and captures the peri-feminist moment before the dawn of women's liberation, she also confronts outright the patriarchal reign of both the Kennedy family and the Johnson administration, and satirizes and subverts entrenched hegemonic attitudes regarding class, race, and gender.

Anyone who has a mental image of *MacBird!* probably envisions the cartoon illustration, drawn by Lisa Lyons, that adorns the cover of publications of the play, as well as the record album cover, letterhead correspondence from Grassy Knoll Press, and other *MacBird!*-related artifacts. The image is an obvious, almost realistic facsimile of the President, dressed in cowboy boots with spurs and an absurdly short kilt. The figure bears a determined grimace as he runs, carrying a lance and shield emblazoned with a cartoon version of the Presidential seal. On the earlier, Grassy Knoll Press/Berkeley Press

covers, the play title and illustration are subtitled with Hamlet's "The Play's the Thing / Wherein I'll Catch the Conscience of the King," making Garson's political agenda to "catch" Johnson clear. The Garson/Lyons fantasy of taking Johnson down is poignantly evident on the last page of the play where the "warrior" who graces the cover is pictured lying dead on a stretcher, being borne away by a procession of followers, led by Robert Ken O'Dunc (109). Garson's intention is not so simple: she meant to cast doubt upon the Kennedys as well as Johnson, and indeed, the entire political system (Garson interview). Foundational to the entire satire is the setting of *Macbeth*, a kingdom in which patriarchal hierarchy, not democracy, is assumed. The play is then a conflict between the main players, MacBird and the O'Duncs, jockeying for sovereignty; and their dialogue is interlaced with patriarchal, hegemonic, and elitist references.

Garson exposes and challenges the power and corruption of the two families, both male-dominated, but in no way "alike in dignity" since the Kennedys were (and still are) members of the aristocratic elite, while Johnson and his immediate family hailed from bucolic Texas roots. In *MacBird!*, Garson paints a class hierarchy as the Ken O'Dunc family members look down their noses at MacBird on account of his Southern, rural culture, while MacBird and his right hand, Crony, in turn, refer to everyday citizens with arrogance. Early in the play, the Ken O'Dunc brothers, Jack, Bobby, and Ted, scheme to monopolize the Presidency for the next several decades, and unbeknownst to MacBird, decide to offer the vice-presidential candidacy to the Johnson lookalike. On the heels of this exchange, the Garsonian witches next appear prophesying. This encounter between the marginalized witches and MacBird, along with his political sidekick, Crony, is one of

a series of episodes which place the play, by definition, within feminist theater tradition because they address patriarchal values of sexism, classism, racism, and general elitism. When the witches, embodied as a black activist, a female student protestor, and an "old leftist, wearing a worker's cap and overalls" (3) approach them, the politicians' first reaction is disdain:

> MAC BIRD: Why, it's a nigra and a filthy beatnik.
>
> CRONY: And there's a dude dressed up in overalls.
>
> MAC BIRD: Goddam! Those beatnik picketers all over!
>
> CRONY: Perhaps I better run and call the cops. (9-10)

MacBird speaks generally of his constituents in a patronizing manner, as when he persuades the Earl of Warren to cover up details of the assassination:

> Just think about those law-abiding folk
>
> That should be sheltered from despair and doubt.
>
> Those simple people need their trusting faith
>
> They count on us to work their problems out
>
> . . . . . .
>
> We bear this load to save them their illusion. (48-49)

As she addresses the elitist attitudes of the ruling class over the working class, Garson also criticizes hierarchies that exist within and among the rich and powerful, while the play also points up ways in which notions about class and gender interact. For instance, after accepting the Vice-presidential candidacy, MacBird delivers a long speech complaining of Ken O'Duncs' sophistication, which he equates with effeminacy: "Now

do our princelings pipe in tenor tones … / Our manly ways give way to mincing words," and his criticism of Kennedy/John Ken O'Dunc himself—"He capers nimbly at a yachting party … / [with] fancy foods and poetry and lutes"—is in stark contrast to MacBird/Johnson's own self-proclaimed masculinity: "But I am not cut out for merry meetings … / And thank the lord I lack the frippery / To sport and blithely laugh in foreign tongues … / At fox hunts, polo parties, garden teas … / I do not lisp in light and lacy lies" (26). Garson's allusion to Richard III's opening monologue targets patriarchy on various fronts. Richard's references to effeteness are not only in contrast to his own deformed shape, but also to his affinity for aggression. Richard III expresses disdain for "this weak piping time of peace" (I.i.24), and Garson's layered comparisons between Johnson and MacBird, and associatively, MacBird and the monstrous Richard III, not only satirize LBJ, but they also speak to patriarchal assumptions and aesthetics: war is manly, peace is effeminate, and "real men" do not have the taste or the time for leisure. Conversely, upon their fated visit to Texas in *MacBird!*, the Kennedy lookalikes and their entourage ridicule the MacBird/Johnson rural lifestyle, associating it with crudeness and primitivity. When the Presidential helicopter arrives at the Texas ranch, Robert observes, "That it is, an oil well in the garden," and the infantilized Teddy remarks, "Bobby, look. There's moo-moos on the lawn," to which their aides respond, "Luncheons on the grass here must be charming. / I understand they roast the oxen whole" (29).

In every sense, *MacBird!* exposes and ridicules other hegemonic assumptions regarding class, gender, culture, and race. Garson plays on the Elizabethan view of gender stereotypes and the gender-polarity rhetoric, so rife within *Macbeth*, that men are

strong and women weak, as seen in John Ken O'Dunc's response to his brother Robert's fear of MacBird: "Good God, this womanly whimpering just when I need your manly immortality (5). Another example of this is in Lady MacBird's "I'm not a man. I am a Southern hostess. / With simple signs of hospitality …" (22). However, because it is a satirical piece, *MacBird!'s* reinforcement of the gender binary that Shakespeare's text both purports and challenges actually parodies such thinking and shows its absurdity. Whereas Shakespeare uses dramatic, serious irony in *Macbeth* to challenge gender stereotypes by reversing supposed sex-related roles, as in the case of Lady Macbeth, who takes the lead at the outset of the play and behaves more brutally and aggressively than her warrior husband, Garson challenges the same notions (which still prevailed in the peri-feminist Sixties) through humorous and satiric uses of ironic elements, such as sarcasm and parody.

Garson's appropriation of Shakespeare's centuries-old *Macbeth* yields hints of the feminist thought that had only just begun to stir in the revolutionary Sixties. A glaring instance of this is in MacBird's self-deprecating acceptance of the Vice-presidential candidacy, delivered to the Ken O' Dunc brothers and their advisors, in which his repeated use of the word "boy" is both comical and absurd:

> I wonder if you know just what this means
> To me, a boy who nearly dropped from school?
> Vice-President of these United States!
> Why, it's an inspiration to *all* boys
> Who daily toil and sometimes feel despair,

To know that in the White House—or quite near

There dwells a man who had to work like them,

Who knew the struggles, knew the ups and downs.

It gives a boy faith in this our land. (15)

The passage clearly points up the exclusion of "girls" and epitomizes the tone of "good ol' boy" politics, for which Johnson has always been known.

The play is riddled with references to unscrupulous patriarchal practices within the government. Garson's caricature of Adlai Stevenson, the Egg of Head, satirizes cowardice and hypocrisy among those within Johnson/MacBird's "new regime" (22). In response to Robert's plea for help in ousting MacBird, "Egg" bursts into a Hamlet-like "To see, or not to see" speech that epitomizes those within patriarchal systems:

Whether 'tis wiser as a statesman to ignore

The gross deception of outrageous liars,

Or to speak out against a reign of evil

And by so doing, end there for all time

The chance and hope to work within for change.

To work within the framework, there's the rub

For who would bear the whips and scorns from boors,

. . . . . .

To quit the club! Be outside looking in!

This outsideness, this unfamiliar land

From which few travelers ever get back in— (42).

Egg ends his declination to help Robert with, "I know you think I'm acting like a toad / But still I choose the middle of the road" (44). Garson takes her audience into hypothetical behind-the-scenes situations that reveal humorously, and somewhat chillingly, politicians' motives and considerations. As Robert confers with his Aides about how to get rid of MacBird, it is apparent that his supreme concern is attaining power, not representing one side or the other of the populace. Serious issues, such as racial unrest and the war, are discussed only in terms of how they may affect votes for or against MacBird and Robert. When Ted suggests, "Heat [the voters] up. / Remind them of their ancient sovereignties / Which now are trampled under by MacBird," Robert calculatingly concludes with, "Heat not the furnace of our foes so hot / That it may singe ourselves. For if we win, / Then we will have to temper this fierce heat" (61). And like the Egg of Head, when faced with a decision for or against war, Robert says, "I basically agree with both positions" (64) and blows on in empty political rhetoric.

Regarding her agenda in attacking the patriarchal system, Garson has said, "My specific propaganda goals for the play were to build a movement that was anti-Democratic party and pro-3rd Party. I didn't want people to stay in the Democratic party. I wanted people to see the play and do a double-take and realize the Kennedys were no different from Johnson." Although Garson's "conscious manipulation in the play is to be anti-Kennedy"—to wake people up and ask, "what are you getting out of the Kennedy bandwagon?" she realized people were not "getting it." She showed up at productions of *MacBird!* in order to get enough signatures to get a third party on the ballot, but found that although people were in the theater "jeering Johnson and booing Kennedy," they

wouldn't sign. "They were too fond of Bobby," Garson remembers; "the Kennedys were beautiful, but they were actually the same as Johnson, there was no difference" (Garson Interview). Robert Brustein did "get it," and his 1967 review of the play echoes Garson's recollection of her intent:

> Garson's conscious purpose is purely political. She wishes to expose the corrosive lust for power that lies behind the orderly façade of government. For this reason, as some have divined, the real object of her satire is less President Johnson than the whole Kennedy dynasty, and the play is already proving more disconcerting to Kennedy liberals than to Johnson conservatives. (*Third Theatre* 57)

Garson actually sees her characterization of Johnson as ennobling, particularly in contrast to the Kennedys. Brustein's assessment of MacBird again corresponds with Garson's stance:

> The emphasis is even more clear in the playing than in the reading because—in the inspired performance of Stacy Keach—the character of MacBird acquires a dimension that the character of Robert Ken O'Dunc (Bobby Kennedy) never reaches. Keach knows what Laurence Olivier knows about the playing of villains—that the actor must love the character he is portraying, no matter how black or evil—and his MacBird, as a result, transcends vulgarity, sentimentality, cornpone folksiness, and brutality to become a figure of some power and substance (actually, he

> turns into Macbeth, a character I should like to see this actor play some day). (*Third Theatre* 57)

MacBird is set against the Ken O'Duncs as a somewhat romantic character, a characterization that is underpinned by his resistance to newfangled technology. MacBird is appalled that the Ken O' Duncs keep the nation's pulse by means of a computer that spits out polls. This contrast between the two sharpens as the play reaches its climax, and the character of MacBird comes into his full patriarchal arrogance. When told that he is losing in the primary against Robert Ken O'Dunc, he cries, "Oh, jealousy! / Because I do bestride the narrow world like a Colossus, these petty men who crawl beneath my legs / turn up their envious eyes at my great prowess. / Of course they hate the hand that holds things firm" (104). This priapic image, borrowed from *Julius Caesar*, which was dubbed by one critic "nasty, rather than bawdy—even if it was to underline MacBird's enormous vanity" (Lask), reveals MacBird as a powerful buffoon, but a dangerous one who believes himself invincible. Regarding this moment in the play, Barbara Garson wrote in an E-mail, "The image . . . is indicative of the trouble males make for the world with their general competitiveness (which, to be fair, is probably a biological extension of sexual competitiveness)." (2 Dec. 2008).

MacBird has been assured in the Witches' second set of prophecies that "No man with beating heart or human blood / Shall ever harm MacBird or touch his throne" (81), so when Robert faces him down on the convention floor in a parodied version of Macbeth's final stand, MacBird fends him off with, "Don't blow away your breath, you two-bit punk. / Your older brother can't protect you here. / I have a charmed career"

(106-7) and repeats the Witches' prophecy. But Robert replies, "Your charm is cursed. Prepare to hear the worst. / At each male birth, my father in his wisdom / Prepared his sons for their envisaged greatness" (107), and Garson delivers her ultimate blow against the "heartless" Kennedy patriarchy as Robert explains that his father "Confirmed . . . our place as lords and leaders" thus:

> To free his sons from paralyzing scruples
> And temper us for roles of world authority
> Our pulpy human hearts were cut away.
> And in their place, precision apparatus
> Of steel and plastic tubing was inserted.
> The sticky, human blood was drained and then
> A tepid antiseptic brine injected . . .
> Thus steeling us to rule as more than men. (107)

Before Robert can use his spear, however, MacBird clutches his chest and dies of a heart attack. Robert Ken O'Dunc hypocritically feigns concern and rushes to MacBird's side, repeating verbatim the lines MacBird spoke after the Ken O' Dunc assassination: "A tragic twist of fateful sorrow, friends, / Makes me your President this fearful day" (108). Surprisingly, Garson believes that, in a Bill Moyers tribute to and estimate of Johnson, which she recalls reading in the *Times*, Moyers "presented a Johnson very much like what I wrote," noting that Johnson had done so much for civil rights, education, and humanitarian efforts that she could never understand why he should be seen as basically

ugly. Garson claims "this is what I wrote about Johnson." Garson, who is still a socialist, ended this particular interview with,

> We're trying to build a movement that would produce a third party. We have not done that. We're probably entering a time when people will become poorer and poorer . . . we'll have ostensibly liberal leaders who legislate for things like the right to have an abortion while people become poorer and poorer. They [the leaders] will provide no economic answers… a democratic party that serves some. (1 Jan. 2008)

As I consider what Garson says today about the failure of radicals to create a third party that is not based in self-serving patriarchy, and I look at *MacBird!'s* resonances with today's political picture, I am struck by what 3rd Witch says to Crony early in the play: "But if you skip and read a later page, *We* take the final bow upon this stage" (11). But they do not. They create a conflagration that frightens and alarms, but they do not unseat the powerful. Instead, the play ends, according to Garson's stage directions, as "*Robert lifts aloft a fallen MacBird banner. Robert's retainers and MacBird's followers join in bearing [MacBird's] body in a grand procession off-stage. Robert and MacBird banners waving side by side"* (108-9). *MacBird!* was written by a hopeful radical who believed the work she and her peers were doing would create change, and it cannot be doubted that they did effect change. But either consciously or unconsciously, Garson must have been aware that the patriarchs would most likely still be dominating the stage at the end of the play.

Chapter Four

MacBird!: A Peri-feminist Model of Feminist Theater Praxis

I have argued in the previous chapter, through a textual and contextual feminist critique, that Barbara Garson's *MacBird!* is peri-feminist, by which I mean that it was written and produced around the nebulous pre-dawn of the women's liberation movement by a radical activist whose re-creation of *Macbeth* spoke subliminally to women's issues. In this chapter, I build upon my critique and contend that Garson should be recognized as important in the scope of feminist theater and female playwrights, and her play, *MacBird!,* should figure prominently in our history of radical Sixties theater. Thus, it should be recognized, not only because it was so highly successful and internationally renowned in a general sense, but also because it is a crucial bridge between radical activist theater and the feminist counter-canon that rose in the Seventies and has boomed in subsequent decades. This chapter concludes my argument in three sections, which, taken together, show *MacBird!* to be a peri-feminist model and forerunner of feminist theater praxis.

In the first section, entitled "Lady in the Sixties," my supporting arguments for such a claim are based on Garson's distinction as a rare female adapter of Shakespeare during the Sixties era, along with her uniquely redemptive approach to the character of Lady Macbeth. In this chapter, I reveal the sharp contrast between Garson's representation of Lady Macbeth in *MacBird!* and other leading artists' representations of the character on stage and film.

In the second section, "*MacBird!*: Precurser to Feminist Adaptation of the Canon," I demonstrate through comparative readings that Garson's methods for opposing the patriarchy, by way of adapting canonical works, predated and prefigured similar methods seen in later feminist adaptations of canonical works.

The final section of the chapter, "Notable Women of *MacBird!*," culminates in a close look at the networking and contributions of four prominent women of theater whose work intersected in *MacBird!*: Rue McClanahan, Toby Cole, Joan Littlewood, and Barbara Garson.

Lady Macbeth in the Sixties

In spite of assumptions that sexism must have been challenged and in decline in the radical Sixties theater movements, I have been surprised to learn that it just wasn't that way; the male leaders in theater at that time were apparently as oblivious to women's issues as the radical political movement leaders were. Regarding this irony, in her article, "Women, Woman, and the Subject of Feminism," Esther Beth Sullivan writes of female dramatists who "found themselves questioning the lack of feminist concern in avant-garde and leftist theater companies" and who observed that "while these organizations provided models of how theater might influence and speak to 'political' purposes, they evidenced a striking indifference to the 'personal' issues surrounding patriarchal oppression" (13). One such dramatist was Roberta Sklar of the Open Theatre, who "began noting the contradiction of the company's disavowal of sexism at the same time that women's work within the company was undervalued" (Sullivan 13).

Likewise, even the most radical Shakespearean theater in the Sixties was a virtual no-woman's land, in which presumably progressive male theater practitioners challenged such social ills as racism, social hierarchy, and war, but made no such interrogations of sexism and female exploitation. To the contrary, they tended to perpetuate the status quo where sexism was concerned. In her book, *Ms-Directing Shakespeare*, Elizabeth Schafer mentions this unfortunate and ironic peri-feminist phenomenon:

> The sixties are known as the decade which heralded new freedoms, particularly in terms of sexual liberation, and a loss of reverence for tradition. In terms of Shakespeare production, directors felt increasingly free to open up radical new outlooks on the bard and a generation of university educated, leftish male directors quickly set about relocating Shakespeare's plays in terms of settings, character sympathies and politics. Although the sixties also saw a new wave of enthusiasm for feminism, this had less impact on the Shakespeare establishment and there was no sudden increase in opportunities for women directors. (Schafer 230)

I refer throughout this chapter on female praxis in Shakespeare production to Schafer's investigation of women directors, and in doing so, I assume that their level of agency is an approximate indicator of women's general agency in theater since directors typically have the ultimate say about what finally ends up on stage.

A first step in my argument will be to zoom in on adaptations of *Macbeth* as I discuss the dismal state of female agency, representation, and participation in

Shakespeare adaptation and production at the time during which Garson wrote *MacBird!*. Garson's presence as a notable female Shakespeare adaptor is anomalous. Routledge's extensive list of Shakespeare adaptations throughout history, compiled by the authors of *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, shows Barbara Garson to be one of a rare handful of women in the Sixties who used canonical drama toward political ends (Fischlin), modeling parodic and re-visionary methods, which have become conventional in feminist adaptation, as she re-fashioned Shakespeare irreverently and liberally to confront patriarchy. The only other Sixties female Shakespeare adapter on the Routledge list is Adrienne Kennedy, the renowned African-American playwright who alluded and referred to Shakespeare and other classics in her 1964 play, *The Owl Answers*. In addition to the rarity of Garson's being a female Shakespeare adaptor at this time, her redemptive representation of Lady Macbeth, discussed in detail in the previous chapter, is also rare in the context of Sixties representations of the character.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* would understandably draw attention during times of political unrest because of its themes surrounding war, evil, power, violence, and ambition. It is no surprise that several prominent adaptations of the play emerged during the Sixties, a time of political and social upheaval—and a time of great exploration and experimentation in the arts. Each of these *Macbeth* adaptations focused on different aspects of the play and employed various experimental methods to emphasize them. Here I explore the character of Lady Macbeth in each to determine the extent to which these productions reflect influences of the pre-women's movement stirrings in the peri-feminist Sixties.

With an eye focused on interpretations and representations of the gender-bending, powerful Lady Macbeth, I selected five of the most prominent alternative versions of *Macbeth* produced during the period, including both film and stage productions, beginning with Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, a film version made in 1957, and ending with Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*, a film version made in 1971. My inclusion of notable cinematic takes on *Macbeth* alongside stage productions provides a broader contextual scope of cultural assumptions about women—not only among theater-goers, to whom Garson, Schechner, and Marowitz were playing, but also among the more general movie-going population as well. In this way, I show a commonality among interpretations of the character in visual, embodied productions on both stage and screen. The consideration of film is perhaps especially pertinent in my exploration since *MacBird!* held such widespread appeal and would have itself become a major motion picture had its production not been abruptly aborted upon the death of Robert Kennedy.

Sandwiched between the two Sixties-era films are three alternative, collage stage adaptations: after Barbara Garson's 1966 *MacBird!*, two pioneers of avant garde Shakespeare adaptation, Charles Marowitz and Richard Schechner, wrote and produced play adaptations of *Macbeth* in 1969. These practitioners were no doubt influenced by the novice playwright, Garson, and her phenomenally and internationally successful *MacBird!*.

Akira Kurosawa, an acclaimed Japanese film director, is famous for his Shakespeare adaptations, particularly his *Macbeth* remake, *Throne of Blood*, and *Ran*, a take-off of *King Lear*. Some criticized Kurosawa's Japanese Noh-meets-Wild West

version of *Macbeth* for its inevitable loss of Shakespearean language in the translation between English and Japanese, but the film is generally exalted for its great cinematography, direction, and performances.

In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa changes the tactics of Lady Macbeth (renamed Asiju and played by Isuzu Yamada) for getting her husband to kill the king, which makes her even more villainous than in Shakespeare's original version. Unlike Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, who straightforwardly persuades her husband to assassinate and usurp the throne of the present king, Asiju deceives and betrays her own husband in her ambitious quest for power; rather than casting doubt upon his manhood as Lady Macbeth does, she plants seeds in him of mistrust, tricking him into thinking his kinsmen and friends will kill him if he doesn't kill them first. Yamada's performance is still and chilling, in keeping with the Japanese title of the film, *Kumonosu-jō*, meaning Spider Web Castle. Although the title ostensibly comes from the name of the forest where the protagonist first meets with prophesying crones, the Spider in the Castle appears to be the predatory Lady. But in spite of her resolute cunning and power, a miscarriage drives her insane, and she does not escape the guilty hand washing and eventual suicide of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. The representation and outcome of the Lady in Kurasawa's version of the tale escalates her culpability for her husband's murderous deeds far beyond that in Shakespeare's original.

In the United States, the first major *Macbeth* adaptation to follow Garson's was Richard Schechner and The Performance Group's (TPG) 1969 *Makbeth, After Shakespeare*. This collage version of *Macbeth* must have been influenced by *MacBird!*;

it, too, played in New York, and it followed hard upon Garson's production, which closed abruptly upon the death of Robert Kennedy in June 1969. It is surely no coincidence that TPG's three "Dark Powers" (the witches) were embodied by two males and one female, as were Garson's witches. In her book, *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*, Ruby Cohn suggests that the characterization of the witches in Garson's "view might have influenced The Performance Group vision of the Dark Powers, common people who mock the bloodthirsty feudal rulers" (102).

In Schechner and TPG's text of *Makbeth*, Lady Macbeth is neither particularly vilified nor featured, her lines and role in the text cut; but her existing lines are identical to those of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's original. C. D. Innes reports that Schechner's Dark Powers

> played the roles of all the common people—soldiers, messengers, servants—as well as representing "female energy", which according to Schechner was repressed in "this patriarchal world". So they were forced to operate "behind the scenes, from underneath, in the guise of Lady Macbeth." (Schechner qtd. in Innes 194; Schechner xvi, xiv)

Before accepting this claim that the production truly addressed women's issues, as Schechner indicates, it is important to realize that Schechner's notes about the oppression of women and his representation of Lady Macbeth were written in 1978, a decade after *Makbeth* ran, and amid the raised consciousness of the Women's Movement. Given the fact that there does not appear to be any significant change in Lady MacBeth's lines in

the textual version of TPG's revision, it is highly likely that Schechner's memory of the production as an overtly feminist piece is itself revised.

Further evidence of Schechner's attention to feminist concerns as retroactive may be derived from Ruby Cohn's detailed coverage of the play in her book, *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*, which was published in 1976, two years before *Makbeth After Shakespeare* and Schechner's notes were published. Cohn introduces *Makbeth After Shakespeare* among one of the few avant garde adaptations of *Macbeth* whose director she was able to contact. Having interviewed Schechner, Cohn describes the maze of mirrors, designed by Brooks McNamara, through which the audience had to weave in order to enter the theater (93), and the use of the tune "Happy Days are Here Again" (94), along with a great number of other specifics about the production and a fairly deep analysis of the play's driving themes. Cohn bases all of her conclusions about the play on the then-unpublished script, "graciously lent [to her] by Richard Schechner," along with published pieces Schechner wrote and personal interviews with the director (400). However, in Cohn's discussion of Schechner's play, Lady Makbeth is only mentioned once, in a reference to the play's theme of cannibalism: "The Makbeths and their friends devour each other" (93). Two years before Schechner published his retroactive claim that the play addresses feminist concerns, Ruby Cohn gleaned nothing of the sort, even as a conflation of women's issues and the plight of the oppressed.

Schechner's treatment of Lady Macbeth is at least neutral, although not redemptive of the character, but Charles Marowitz's European adaptation, *A Macbeth*, is an interpretation that focuses on the protagonist's being jinxed and doomed regardless of

his own will, largely due to his wife's collusion with the witches. Marowitz's Lady Macbeth, played by Thelma Holt, is demon-possessed and in cahoots with the witches, thus deceiving and betraying her husband as Kurasawa's Lady does. This trend of turning Lady Macbeth against her husband adds an even more sinister element to the character than the original; Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, while ruthless in her ambition, is developed as intensely loyal in her spousal—and criminal—partnership. In addition to extra-vilification of Marowitz's Lady Macbeth, who does not merely persuade her husband to murder, but "takes hold of MACBETH's hands and drives the daggers into Duncan's heart" (62), the director/playwright chooses subsequently to put her in her place, so to speak, as a woman, sexualizing her while simultaneously obliterating her power in the sleepwalking scene.

Marowitz is imperiously defensive about criticism of his decision that she be "virtually naked" during the sleepwalking scene and indicates in his introduction to the published play that the following explanation should put the matter of the "see-through nightie" to rest:

> After the Witches have hexed their mistress and engendered the madness which ushers in her death, the original woman—freed of diabolical influence—is restored. That is, Lady Macbeth as woman and wife returns. To assert the frailty of that woman as opposed to the hauteur of the voodooienne, she appears in a costume which emphasizes her femininity; that is her human characteristics as opposed to her malevolent attributes.

> In that scene, she was vulnerable, helpless, solitary and female; in every other, guileful, possessed, possessive and sub-human. (Marowitz 14)

Ironically, his statement of defense only reveals more conclusively Marowitz's gratuitous, trite, and misogynist choice of dichotomously representing women as either evil and powerful or weak and sexually objectified; Marowitz, by his own admission, equates the natural condition of womanhood with frailty, and so his limited vision of Lady Macbeth is either voodoo witch or sex kitten.

Capping off the *Macbeths* of the Sixties era is Roman Polanski's 1971 film, *Macbeth.* The only thing noticeably different about Polanski's interpretation of Lady Macbeth is the choice to strip her naked in the sleepwalking scene. Anticipated to be a brash, bawdy sex romp since it was being produced by Hugh Hefner and Playboy Productions, the nudity of the mostly-octogenarian coven and a brief moment of obscenity, when one nubile-looking witch flips up her skirt and flashes Macbeth and Banquo, are surprisingly non-gratuitous or exploitive in the context of the piece. However, as in Marowitz's *Macbeth* adaptation, gratuitously denuding Lady Macbeth in the sleepwalking scene appears to be a given. The directorial choice, made by both Marowitz and Polanski, is worth noting from a feminist viewpoint because Shakespeare's embedded stage direction, delivered quite precisely through the Gentlewoman to the Doctor, reads, "I have see her rise from her bed, throw her night-gown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon't, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed" (V.i.4-8). Confirmation of the Lady's sleepwalking attire comes quickly

after, when the Gentlewoman alerts the Doctor to Lady Macbeth's entrance: "Lo you, here she comes! This is her very guise, and upon my life, fast asleep" (V.1. 19-20).

Directors needn't be slave to playwrights' specific costuming dictates, but it is unsettling that the male directors in both of these instances elect, randomly it seems, to sexualize the already-vulnerable, insane Lady Macbeth in the scene, thereby adding to the mix of her agonized guilt and "sorely charged" heart a titillating element of male gaze in regard to the Doctor character on stage, as well as the audience in the theater. In her exhaustive chapter on *Macbeth* adaptations, Ruby Cohn refers to Marowitz's choice to dress Lady Macbeth in a "transparent nightdress" as "prefiguring Polanski's nude Lady Macbeth" (83). Cohn declares, in fact, that "in this preponderantly masculine tragedy . . . almost all modern offshoots are hostile to Lady Macbeth, recalling the old limerick: There once was a king named Macbeth; / A better king never drew breath; / The faults of his life / Were all due to his wife / The notorious Lady Macbeth" (101).

It is ironic that one of Shakespeare's foremost tragic female characters, created in one of theater history's most markedly misogynist places and periods—Elizabethan London, where women were forbidden on stage and their presence replaced by pre-adolescent boys or effeminized men—should be more complex and sympathetic than the socially enlightened, equality-seeking, sexually freed Sixties revolutionaries interpreted her. William Shakespeare's text shows Lady Macbeth to be a self-determined woman who has loved a child and lost it; who fixes her eye upon an ambitious goal, for which she relinquishes her gender identity and her very soul; who masterminds an assassination, carries herself with graceful and powerful presence, and eventually falls into deep

remorse over her transgressions. In fact, the character is legendary for her inconsolable guilt, signified by her compulsive hand washing. By the end of the play, she goes insane and commits suicide as a result of her deeply felt remorse. Throughout the play, Shakespeare provides other fleshy bits of background of Lady Macbeth's life, which are often ignored in productions of the play, and which beg deep questions about the character: What about her lost baby, a point which seems connected to the many references to babies and birth in the play? What about the father Lady Macbeth mentions whom Duncan so closely resembles in sleep? How desperate must Lady Macbeth be in the first place to pray so readily to dark spirits to "unsex" her? To what extent is she privy to, or accomplice to, Macbeth's subsequent murders? If she is neither, why does she dream of those assassinations and speak of them while sleepwalking?

My point is this: the freedom of Sixties theater offered a rich frontier wherein Lady Macbeth could be developed to a potential that would at least depict her complexity as Shakespeare wrote her, and beyond. Surprisingly, as it turns out, she remained marginal, flat, or vilified in prominent productions of that time. And lest my complaint about the glossing of Lady Macbeth seems a targeted attack exclusively on male practitioners, it is not. What I see is a sign of the peri-feminist times, when female subjectivity in Shakespeare remained ironically buried; even Joan Littlewood, the renowned woman director known for "rejecting traditional interpretations and conventional stage business, with the implication that [her] Theatre Workshop productions actually got closer to the 'real' play," is reported to have directed Lady

Macbeth in such a way as to draw criticism for trite representation of the character in her Sixties-era 1957 production (Schafer152).

As a result of the era's glossing of Lady Macbeth as flatly heartless, Ruby Cohn writes, "None of the offshoots [of *Macbeth*] render the poignancy of Lady Macbeth's conscience" (102), but on one point Cohn is mistaken in her sweeping complaint: the exception is Garson's *MacBird!*, which does not relegate the Lady to the status of sex object, shrew, or monster. Instead, as I have shown in great detail both here and in my contextual critique, the character is given a rational voice, which she uses to protest the patriarchal terror her husband is wreaking on the country (Garson 75).

***Macbird!*: Precursor to Feminist Adaptation of the Canon**

The previous section, which describes Garson's re-presentation of Lady Macbeth, reveals a striking contrast to other adaptations of *Macbeth* during the period. These points of departure from Shakespeare's text in Garson's version reduce the vilification and blame Lady Macbeth is saddled with in the original text while other Sixties adapters have elected instead to exaggerate and build upon the traditional, sexist representation of the character with ever more misogynist interpretations of Lady. In those versions, she is a kind of fourth witch who plots against her husband, or is a defeated and sexualized object of male gaze—or, in the case of Charles Marowitz's re-make, both. Additionally, as I have shown in the previous chapter, Garson presented the plight and role of female radical activists of the Sixties through her portrayal of the female 1st Witch, attacked patriarchal oppression on numerous fronts, and interrogated gender stereotypes.

Sixties Theater: A No-Woman's Land

Barbara Garson's tremendous success as a playwright is mind-boggling considering the temporal context in which she wrote *MacBird!*. It is evident that the Sixties was a virtual no-woman's land in theater. Feminist consciousness was bubbling beneath the surface, but women were still highly oppressed and objectified, and ironically so, given the surge of radical activism that sought Civil Rights, freedom, and forms of socialism, particularly through various forms of performance, including theater. Amid the tide of experimental theater that was being generated during the era, women's agency was relatively non-existent. And yet, *MacBird!*, an anomalous Sixties Shakespeare adaptation because of its authorship by a woman, was overwhelmingly well received worldwide. Curiously, although *MacBird!* is still mentioned from time to time in scholarly articles, Garson has not been conclusively or sufficiently recognized for her significant role as an astoundingly successful female playwright.

Helen Krich Chinoy, in her article, "Art Versus Business: The Role of Women in American Theatre," raises the importance of recognizing and exhuming from history the work, and the works, of women practitioners such as Garson: "As women with new self-awareness and enthusiasm try to use theatre to explore what it means to be a woman, they also look back in the hope of locating themselves in some female tradition that will help them understand their problems in the present as well as plan for the future" (23). *MacBird!* can be viewed as a sort of missing link in women's theater history, appearing on the scene long after the first wave of the women's movement, emerging at the dawn of the second, written by a woman, and blatantly confrontational of patriarchy; it is the sort

of play, and Garson the sort of rare practitioner, working as she was within a masculine frontier of experimental theater and Shakespeare adaptation, in which female theater practitioners may find precedent in the peri-feminist Sixties.

Sue-Ellen Case charts a history of women's involvement in theater in her book, *Feminism and Theatre*. She points to the earliest known pioneers as women playing the silent mimes in Greek and Roman street theater, and moves along the centuries and decades in Western theater history, singling out prominent female theater practitioners and their work up to the mid-twentieth century. Case's next mention of women's work in theater—both practical and theoretical—is in the Seventies and Eighties, with no mention of the transitional Sixties. Similarly, Elaine Aston, in her book, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, discusses early, mid- (through post-WWII), and late (from the Seventies on) twentieth century theater in terms of women's work and feminism, but she, like Case, skips the Sixties.

It is often difficult to find such missing links as Garson's *MacBird!* in discourse about feminist theater evolution, perhaps because of what Aston herself describes as a tendency among feminists to gloss over periods in theater history during which feminism was obscured, such as the post-suffrage period in the United States. Aston's discussion of "the feminist concept of women 'hidden from history'" is particularly useful in a consideration of Garson's *MacBird!* because the feminist practice of questioning representations of women of the past followed so immediately on the heels of Garson's peri-feminist work. The second-wave feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s who set out to uncover "'lost' female ancestors" in the arts were of course looking farther back

than their own decade. To begin with, female playwrights were found to be more difficult to unearth than writers in other literary genres (Aston 16), and furthermore, because of their contemporaneity, women like Garson whose endeavors appeared at the end of the reign of blatant female oppression were not even noticed or considered among those artists who were buried in history. It is possible that some erasure of Garson and *MacBird!* had already begun even as feminists were digging through history to recover female playwrights of the more distant past.

Related to this erasure, Aston comments, "Evaluating the inter-war period as unworthy of interest because it did not give a public face to feminism means that the significant number of women writing and working in theatre during this period are overlooked and 'lost' to view"(28). This can be applied to the peri-feminist era. For the most part, the world in which Garson lived "did not give a public face to feminism," even though the great women's liberation movement was on the verge of erupting. Aston notes that some of the women's theater work from the Twenties and Thirties has now been recovered (28), and I hope similarly to call attention to Garson and *MacBird!*, in order to prevent erasure or marginalization of what was an extraordinary female accomplishment in theater and feminist history.

Feminist Adaptation of Classic Works

In the following section, I continue my argument that Garson, writing within the peri-feminist zeitgeist of the Sixties, prefigured the kind of feminist adaptation of canonical, classic texts that sprang from second-wave confrontation of the canon, boomed in the eighties, and continues today. I will discuss various approaches to, and

motives for, feminist adaptation, and I will present examples of feminist adaptations of canonical works in juxtaposition with Barbara Garson's *MacBird!*.

Revisionist adaptation is a feminist practice with the goal of approaching canonical works from non-hegemonic perspectives. It fits the model Lizbeth Goodman describes when she writes, "Making of some kinds of feminist theatre involves prioritizing feminist concerns over literary and dramatic concerns" (22). Feminist adaptations often insist upon reconsideration of characters cast as villains or victims based on damaging myths and stereotypes. I propose that *MacBird!* be listed as an early feminist, or, more accurately, peri-feminist adaptation, on the grounds that the play is a rare example of a Shakespeare work adapted by a woman during the rash of radical Sixties productions that challenged the patriarchal "establishment." Also, while I cannot claim that Barbara Garson's overt intention was to prioritize women's issues in her adaptation of *Macbeth*, my close scrutiny of *MacBird!* under a feminist lens reveals significant differences between Shakespeare's original text and Garson's remake, which (perhaps inadvertently on the playwright's part) de-vilify, redeem, and ennoble female characters.

In the following section, as I compare *MacBird!* to various women's adaptations of canonical works that followed it, I will be applying the label "canonical" to entrenched texts that are considered to be classics, including 20th Century works; these works tend to be included in textbooks and anthologies aimed at academic as well as mainstream audiences, on the basis of their generally agreed upon lasting literary worth and appeal.

"Originally the Canon meant the choice of books in our teaching institutions" (15), writes Harold Bloom in his book, *The Western Canon*. Bloom asserts that actually, however, his own list of works deemed worthy of the Canon are "selected for both their sublimity and their representative nature" (2). This is the vaguely defined, yet generally agreed upon, canon to which I refer in this section.

Retooling the Canon: a Feminist Tradition

In some cases, playwrights have applied adaptation as a feminist method to challenge the misogynist or hegemonic texts themselves, while others rather seize upon and embrace the texts—as Garson does—retooling them at will and using them as authoritative in presenting historically resonant, anti-patriarchal issues.

MacBird! was a unique and radical undertaking by a female artist who used a canonical frame to confront patriarchy. Garson modeled methods since used by feminist theater groups from the Seventies women's movement to the present. Garson's re-setting of the story, re-imagination of the female characters, and satirical subversion and free manipulation of the "sacred" Shakespearean text are echoed in the canonical adaptations of playwrights Paula Vogel and Mary Ann MacDonald; Shawn Sides of Austin's The Rude Mechanicals; and the feminist theater group, Split Britches, among others, including myself. Because most classically entrenched works marginalize, vilify, exclude, and generally misrepresent women, people of color, and other oppressed populations, some scholars and artists in the early feminist movements concerned about issues of gender and race advocated abandoning Shakespeare altogether. Most, however,

sought other solutions. In the preface to their book, *Languages of Theatre Shaped by Women*, Jane de Gay and Lizbeth Goodman write,

> Although feminist critics from Kate Millett onwards have criticized the patriarchal nature of the canon and the prevalence of 'dead white male' writers within it, there has been ongoing interest in asserting women's right to act in the canonical plays by men – and in discovering how to do so on their own terms. (4)

As debates on the issue churned, many sought not to dispose of the canon, but rather to claim, confront, chastise, or reject it through revisionist techniques. In her book, *Re-dressing the Canon*, Alisa Solomon speaks to this ethical and artistic decision:

> While I recognize the misogyny within the Western dramatic tradition and resent women's frequent exclusion from that tradition, I am not ready to join some colleagues in ditching canonical plays as irrelevant or hostile to feminist concerns. I'd rather widen the openings that theater's denaturalizing effects provide to expose and exploit Western drama's revelation of gender's artificiality. (9)

Solomon's is precisely the tack that many feminist playwrights, directors, and performance artists have taken: they rewrite, cross-cast, parody, and otherwise manipulate and capitalize on Shakespeare in various ways that confront and examine the sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy inherent within those texts. In the following pages, I present samples of relevant feminist adaptations in order to demonstrate the ways in

which Garson's play anticipated and modeled feminist adaptation methodology that came after it.

Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, A Play about a Handkerchief*, first produced in New York in 1979, is a feminist adaptation that made an impact on theater-going audiences. Vogel's feminist adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* takes place entirely in Desdemona's chamber where male characters never appear, but are only referred to in the women's conversations. Vogel subverts assumptions about class and gender in *Othello*, giving the female characters motivation and agency, and reassigning stereotypical character traits to the lady, the prostitute, and the serving maid. Desdemona, for instance, is transformed from virtuous lady in Shakespeare's original into the sex-crazed trollop Othello believes her to be. In spite of the complete reversal in her characterization, Vogel's Desdemona meets the same fate that Shakespeare's does, which reinforces the author's depressing point: violence against women is inevitable.

As evidenced by the play's darkly humorous style, there is clearly no love lost between Paula Vogel and William Shakespeare; *Desdemona* is an attack on what Vogel deems a misogynist text. Vogel uses a very contemporary prose style, showing no reverence or adherence to Elizabethan conventions of playwriting. Instead, her stage directions encourage directors to use film-like jump cuts, emulating Wolfgang Bauer's 1970 play, *Shakespeare the Sadist*, to which *Desdemona* is a tribute (236). Vogel has reported that upon first reading *Othello*,

> I was struck by the fact that my main point of identification, of subjectivity, was a man who is supposedly cuckolded, that I was weeping

> for [him] rather than for Desdemona . . . and it wounded me that Desdemona is nothing but an abstraction and that I didn't find any way of identifying with her. (quoted in Bigsby 299-300)

While *MacBird!* carries a bitterly humorous tone, which is in some ways similar to Vogel's tone, Garson's use of blank verse and Shakespearean allusions translate as a celebration of Shakespeare, rather than a criticism of the original text. Garson's attack is not on the canonical work itself as Vogel's is; while both playwrights capitalize on the familiar tale, using it as template to expose and condemn patriarchy in general, Vogel's additionally aims her attack back at the original text.

Amid his high praise of *MacBird!*, Peter Brook discusses the effect of Garson's co-opting of *Macbeth* to her purposes, an effect which lends a subliminal credibility to the revamped text even as it parodies the original:

> In using a Shakespearean structure, however farcically, the author benefits for the breadth of a Shakespearean chronicle: behind the in-jokes and the collegiate gags lurks the dark and sinister weight of "Macbeth" itself parodied but submerged. And there is a salient difference: an historical play is unavoidably romantic. At a distance the cruelest bloodshed takes on an excited red glow, the comic-strip version without the poetry, without beauty, without art, is a sobering and disturbing blueprint. ("'MacBird' Lets Fly" F1)

Garson's pastiche, while irreverent and parodic, is thus steeped in Shakespearean texts and conventions in such a way that the author's appreciation of Shakespeare is

evident. Consequently, *MacBird!* resembles more closely Ann-Marie MacDonald's 1988 *Good Night, Desdemona (Good Morning, Juliet)*. In this play, MacDonald's depiction of Desdemona contrasts sharply with Vogel's, the former representation being noble and virtuous and the latter crude and cynical. MacDonald's protagonist, Constance Ledbelly, is a nerdy academic whose doctoral thesis claims that neither Romeo nor Othello can be categorized as true, tragic heroes because they maintain agency; "any grains of authentic tragedy must be seen to reside in the heroines, Desdemona and Juliet" (MacDonald 1.1). From there, the play slips into parody as Constance enters the world of the two plays and seeks to save the characters from their fates. MacDonald interweaves familiar Shakespearean elements, including mistaken identity, gender confusion, characters and lines from other Shakespeare plays, and blank verse. As in Garson's *MacBird!*, the combination of silliness and classic literary trappings serves to re-imprint audiences' cultural memories and reverence of the so-called Bard while also incidentally calling into question the canonical text and the current hegemonic assumptions it reinforces. In her discussion of Canada's premiere production of *Good Night, Desdemona*, Susan Bennett discusses the way the play "attempts to mark . . . critical distance from tradition, from the hegemonic Shakespeare that serves conservatism and the past" (156):

> The play staged an engaged tension between ideas of Canadian nationhood and the colonial imprint of the English (literature). So, as *Goodnight Desdemona* found an audience in Toronto, it must have been difficult for anyone involved with the production (or, for that matter, its reception) to forget the presence of Canada's Stratford Shakespeare Festival, not so

> very many miles down the road and long a cornerstone in Canada's national artistic pride. (156)

Bennett's observation suggests the power of adaptation to change collective, entrenched notions about the canon and its resonances in contemporary culture, which is often an end in itself in adaptation. This purpose may be achieved in an all-out attack, as in the case of Vogel's *Desdemona*, or it may issue from the kind of lighthearted, Shakespeare-friendly subversion seen in Garson's and MacDonald's work.[14]

MacDonald's method and tone, so similar to Garson's, does not condemn the canon, but rather co-opts it in a way that resonates between a current situation and a classic (and perhaps didactic) tale of greed and corruption. Garson's remake of *Macbeth*, created as it was before the Women's Liberation movement, presents a re-imagination of Shakespeare's female characters, which is much more subtle than the radical re-presentations in outright feminist adaptations of later decades. But in those unobtrusive references to feminist issues, Garson's text prefigures Vogel's and MacDonald's adaptations, which feature a rewriting of *Othello's* female characters in what Ann Rosalind Jones categorizes as an "oppositional" feminist response to traditional literature. That is, "the ideological message and force of the reigning code is . . . pulled out of its dominant frame of reference and subversively inserted into an 'alternative frame of reference'" (Jones qtd. in Novy 73). In her comparison of Vogel's and MacDonald's

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[14] Marianne Novy discusses the difference in popularity of the two plays: MacDonald's has consistently been played more often and for broader audiences. Novy attributes this to a "difference in tone," for while MacDonald's is playfully parodic, Vogel's is more cynical. (70-1)

plays, Marianne Novy notes that both "can easily be connected to the feminist impulse to show strength and authority" (67). These and other feminist adaptations "stress the limitations of [Shakespeare's] plays as well-known cultural myths about women's possibilities," (73) and "focus on the possibilities of new plots that will lead to at least survival and often greater freedom for the female characters" (81). The feminist drive to adapt stems from an objective to expose rather than bury patriarchal error, and *MacBird!* is a prime example of a female playwright's success in doing that.

The feminist artists whose adaptations perhaps most resemble Garson's in terms of satire and parody are Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deborah Margolin. Their Split Britches Company has been satirically adapting classic texts for feminist purposes since 1981. Split Britches' 1991 *Belle Reprieve* is a lesbian-centric, cross-cast collaborative adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire,* which relies as much upon familiar cultural images associated with the Hollywood film version, starring Marlon Brando, as it does Williams' text. In their usual parodic style, the Split Britches team challenge gender stereotypes in the original story of Blanche, Stella, and Stanley in ironic homoerotic images, dance, dialogue, and song. Particularly poignant (and funny) is the meta-theatrical moment of Stanley and Blanche's final clash, which in the original play, results in Stanley raping Blanche. Here, however, Blanche (played by drag queen, Bette Bourne), pulls off her stiletto-heeled shoe and threatens Stanley (played by drag artist, Peggy Shaw) with it:

> STANLEY: If you want to be in this play you've got to drop the stiletto.
>
> BLANCHE: If you want to be in this play you've got to make me!

STANLEY: If you want to play a woman, the woman in this play gets raped and goes crazy in the end.

BLANCHE: I don't want to get raped and go crazy. I just wanted to wear a nice frock, and look at the shit they've given me! (Bourne, et. al 181)

From there, Stella enters, wrests the shoe from Blanche, and initiates the song-and-dance number that ends the play on an absurdly upbeat note. This scene, which condemns the inevitable and legendary rape of Blanche DuBois by making light of it, is reminiscent of the highly parodic Negro Minstrel play-within-the-play in Garson's *MacBird!*. *Belle Reprieve* epitomizes what feminist adaptation that has followed in the tradition of Garson's *MacBird!*, with its over-the-top interrogations of masculinity and other gender and racial stereotypes, can do with the canon—and what it can do *for* those of marginalized identities, including women. As audiences laugh at the absurdities of tradition and what the canon mandates as inevitable, old assumptions and images are disarmed and replaced by new possibilities regarding agency and outcomes.

Another powerful Split Britches revision of a modern drama classic is *Valley of the Doll's House*. For this mid-nineties production, the company (Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deb Margolin) collaborated with 28 University of Hawai'i students to devise and perform an adaptation which conflates Ibsen's *A Doll House* with Jacqueline Suzanne's bestseller, *Valley of the Dolls*. Suzanne's characters, Ann, Helen, Jennifer, and Neely, watch as Ibsen's Nora and Torvald play out a scene in which Torvald refers to Nora in increasingly absurd diminutive terms that riff from the recurring bird names he calls her in the original version: here Torvald begins with "my lark," then moves to "my

squirrel," and on to "my little sweet tooth, my little spendthrift, and my little prodigal." Other characters, created and enacted by members of the ensemble, include Korean Doll, Dorothy, Stage Manager, Mumbling Men, Hula Doll, Filipino Elvis, Geraldo, Prince Charming, Scarlet, and Elizabeth Taylor, among others (276-8). According to production dramaturg Juli Burk's description and excerpts from the script, the play exploded Henrik Ibsen's text in a poststructural extravaganza of feminism and lesbian subjectivity:

> For Ibsen's text to do what Patricia R. Schroeder has described as bringing "to light the social and political systems that condition female subjectivity and limit women's choices" in a way that realistically represented the lived experiences of both the audience and cast members of this production, the theatre form known as realism had to be abandoned, regardless of its power as a repressor, oppressor, or social inequity banner waver. . . Our production clearly wasn't realism, it wasn't boring, and it certainly wasn't Ibsen. (Burk 284-5)

Split Britches' repertoire is studded with other allusive and queered re-writes of canonical works, including Luisa M. Alcott's *Little Women* and the fairytale, *Beauty and the Beast*. In all of these, as in *MacBird!*, the original text becomes a playground for satirical elements of parody, humor, exaggeration, and irony; the playwrights deconstruct and reconstruct the canonical piece to the advantage of their political agenda.

Female theater artists continue to use the canon as a springboard for contemporary work. In a recent interview with Austin, Texas Rude Mechanicals artistic director, Shawn Sides, I asked, "Why bother with the canon?" Sides, whose "joy lives in adaptation,"

replied, “It’s not a bother, it’s a treasure trove. I like to see our mythology that we carry with us and what [it means] to us now . . . because you’ve got to admit, it’s pretty great writing . . . it’s a skeleton of a thing you can hang onto so that you can just go crazy—[we can] insert ourselves into this story that culture keeps telling itself over and over again. It’s a platform” (Sides). As with Garson, Sides’ fondness for the canon allows her freedom to attack it, as Sides did in a brutal remake of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*; she sometimes uses it, as Garson has done, as a template for telling new stories that resonate in traditional tales. In 1997, in collaboration with the Rudes, Sides conceived, directed, and produced *curst & Shrewd: The Taming of the Shrew Unhinged*, a multi-textual collage adaptation that combined Shakespeare’s original words, the actors’ own experiences, and various *Shrew*-related texts. Sides’ hope was that “such an approach would open the text up revealing ‘shrew-taming’ to be a persistent urge, even in our contemporary culture” (“Aims” 4).

Billed on the Rudes’ website as “a candid, impertinent and downright feminazi look at marriage and mating,” *curst and Shrewd* won local critical acclaim (Rude). Oddly enough, Sides does not currently remember much about the play’s success, even though her original technical essay, “Collaging the Shrew: How to See an Unruly Text Through to Production,” details its accolades (“Collaging”1). Instead, her prevailing memories about reception of *curst* have to do with disappointment that many of her Shakespearean acquaintances resented the audacity of the company in deconstructing a “sacred text” and using it as a tool of “male bashing” (Sides interview).

I personally recall *curst and Shrewd* as a pivotal moment in my own early love affair with Shakespeare; after seeing Sides' production, I could never approach a Shakespeare play with the same blind devotion and reverence again. My teaching and directing subsequently turned toward inquiry and revision, which has since emanated from my practice, making the students and actors with whom I work more apt to read and perform against the canonical grain, or to use the canon parodically to illuminate current controversial issues. Such adaptors as Sides, who even as late as the Nineties was accused of misuse of the revered canon, blazed a transgressive trail for me. In the same way, Garson's *MacBird!* paved the way for earlier adaptors of "sacred" Shakespeare, beginning with male theater practitioners of the Sixties, such as Richard Schechner, Charles Marowitz, Peter Brook, and Joseph Papp, whose critiques of *MacBird!* and subsequent *Macbeth* adaptations indicate they were inspired and influenced by Garson's play. It would follow, then, that later feminist playwrights and performance artists of the Seventies and Eighties were also building upon a revisionist tradition and style that sprang from Garson and her contemporaries.

The first Shakespeare adaptation I wrote was also based on *Macbeth* in an attempt to expose and exploit misogyny in the canon, and to interrogate patriarchy in general. In my play, titled *The Weird Sisters, Hand in Hand*, produced in 2005 by The Weird Sisters Women's Theater Collective in Austin, Texas, I explore historic misogyny in Shakespeare's text and expose King James VI of Scotland and I of England, for whom Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, as a sadistic witch persecutor. My adaptive techniques in this play are very like Garson's because I manipulate the original text liberally,

reassigning lines to different characters than those who originally spoke them; borrow text from other Shakespeare plays; and create my own blank-verse or, as I have often referred to it, "Fakespeare." My play also humanizes the Weird Sisters and places the voice of the oppressed in their mouths, as Garson's play does with her radical-left witches. In the same way that Garson co-opts and re-tools Shakespeare's text in *MacBird!* to show patriarchal oppression over the marginalized and the masses, I use Shakespeare to demonstrate how misogynistic oppression connects women across class lines; in *The Weird Sisters, Hand in Hand*, even the privileged Lady Macbeth suffers oppression when her husband blames her for her inability to bear a viable heir. In a soliloquy I partly re-appropriated from Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, and partly composed in blank verse, Lady expresses fear that she will be "beheaded, hanged, or put away / For failing to produce her husband's seed" (*WSHH* 1.6). The plot follows Lady's attempts to compensate for her barrenness, making her a more sympathetic character. Macbeth becomes more bloodthirsty and paranoid than in the original text, using the accusation of witchcraft to justify murder and tyranny, and carrying out political revenge on the bodies of women.

The words in my adaptation come from the original *Macbeth* and other Shakespeare plays, scholarship on the European witch hunts, documents from actual witch trials, and my own imagination inspired by descriptions and images from the period. My method is nearly identical to Garson's, whose text comes from Shakespeare plays and contemporary socio-political texts, including newspapers, songs, and various other cultural catchphrases.

I would argue that through the script itself, the casting choices, the collective nature of the production, and the collaborative rehearsal process, *The Weird Sisters, Hand in Hand* subverted women's typical experience of performing Shakespeare by making them central instead of marginal to the production in every way. The play provided a venue in which the women involved seized upon a text that has traditionally carried an anti-female tone and inserted themselves centrally into a process that has historically marginalized female actors. In a similar way, I believe that Garson's co-opting of the most elevated and patriarchal text, which she used to attack the most elevated and patriarchal traditions and leadership, provided for all of those involved—onstage, backstage, and in the audience—a space in which to participate in the subversion of oppressive power in their culture.

My last adaptation similarly subverted assumptions about the silenced Sycorax, who in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is vilified not only for her sex, but also for her old age and African origin. In my re-telling, Sycorax is a black, lesbian healer who rises to power, but is eventually scapegoated and banished from her home in Algiers.

In her article, "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female," Abena P. A. Busia calls the inclusion of such characters as Sycorax in *The Tempest* an "invocation of the native woman, embedded as it is in the narrative of colonial authority and recalling once again a conflation between sexuality and bestiality or the subhuman, [which] serves as a precise reminder of the place, within the narratives, of the incarceration of native women who have no recourse to any countertext" (Busia 98). My own work takes Busia's observation as a challenge to feminist theater

scholarship and practice, and provides such a countertext for Sycorax. *Sycorax* also provides a significant title role for black female actors, who, Busia notes, "are seldom present as billed players on the stage, and when they are, they do not speak coherently" (94). My Sycorax is continually present on stage, and her subjective narrative drives the play from beginning to end. Through adaptation of *The Tempest*, I have created space for a silenced, oppressed character to tell her story and to be re-remembered.

Preceding all of these adaptations I have mentioned, and the large body of feminist adaptations of which they are a part, Barbara Garson's peri-feminist *MacBird!* gave a unique, redemptive voice to Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, a female character hyper-vilified in the Sixties, and confronted the patriarchal political structure of the time. *MacBird!* is therefore among the very first seedlings from which we can trace modern feminism's co-opting of the canon for anti-patriarchal, political purposes. Her play marks a beginning of the feminist urge to address the core problem that Ellen Donkin and Susan Bennett identify in the bulk of canonical dramatic literature:

> Not only are women underrepresented on stage, but the female characters that do exist are more closely linked to the projections and fantasies of their male creators than to the complex, diverse, and ambiguous lives of real women in history. So two kinds of damage are perpetuated: underrepresentation and distortion. And for women of color, for lesbians, and for lesbians of color, the issue is virtual erasure. (1).

Garson was a leader among those who have sought to spoil the patriarchal party, poststructuralize hierarchical tradition, and burst open the canon so that it becomes a tool

of inquiry—a portal into the silenced stories not merely of fictional characters, but also of the real women the authors of those characters have mis-represented for so long.

Notable Women of *MacBird!*: McClanahan, Cole, Littlewood, And Garson

The phenomenon of *MacBird!* involved at least four renowned women theater practitioners. This is exceptional, particularly in light of Helen Krich Chinoy's observation that in spite of the public nature of theater, women's role in theater history has been obscured on an individual as well as corporate level. "It has not been easy," she writes, "to see a female network in the composite art of theatre or to find a sense of 'we-consciousness,' as Simone de Beauvoir calls it, among actresses, playwrights, designers, directors, and producers" (23). It is surprising to find that just such a "female network" existed around *MacBird!.* In addition to Garson, who wrote and published the play, the work of other noted women of theater who intersected in *MacBird!* include Rue McClanahan, Toby Cole, and Joan Littlewood. According to Chinoy's suggestion, today's women theater scholars and practitioners may find in this interconnection of notable theater women an all-important touchstone. These women's interest and investment in *MacBird!* present a peri-feminist model, which can be embraced and examined by those who seek precedent for female networking in theater during those relatively silent spells existing between the women's movements.

As I pursue the question of why these remarkable theater women—some already well established in the profession, and some just breaking in—were attracted to this particular play, Chinoy's further observations are illuminating:

> For although many women have made their mark in theatre, it hasn't been easy for them to do so on Broadway or in the mainstream of theatre. In show business as in other businesses and professions, women have not easily or regularly come into positions of importance or power in the major institutions. They have been restricted by the blatant prejudices against letting women have any say where big money and decision making have been involved, as well as by their socialization into a passive but emotional self-image. (Chinoy 24)

Chinoy's statement figures interestingly in a discussion of *MacBird!* because while the play was not technically in "the mainstream of theatre," but rather an off-Broadway play, it *became* a blockbuster, which drew the radical audience who loved it, as well as over-thirty, establishment-types, who either flocked to it out of curiosity or detested it, as evidenced by the "surprisingly . . . middle-aged citizens rather than mostly young people as had been expected" (Funke 93, 1) who attended. It also caught the attention of the world, including producers and directors from mainstream interests in London's West End and Stratford, who were not, strictly speaking, radicals. But the radical nature of *MacBird!* did keep it outside the margins of decency and acceptability—and the promise of capital success—which may explain women's free access to it. These qualities attracted women who were accustomed to operating within what Chinoy points out as non-powerful and non-money-oriented professional theater. For Garson and McClanahan, the surprising success of radical *MacBird!* was an unexpected break into fame, while for

Cole and Littlewood, who had already found a niche in radical, political theater, it was their stock-in-trade.

This concentrated look at the women of *MacBird!* is an important reminder that even in the very sexist and exclusionary realm of Shakespeare production in the Sixties, women who have since been largely ignored for their participation and contribution did in fact work and compete for the high stakes of political enlightenment and artistic recognition.

Rue McClanahan: The First Lady of *MacBird!*

Rue McClanahan was, in 1967, an aspiring actor who, because of her creation of the role of Lady MacBird, went on to become an acclaimed stage and screen actor, best known for the role of Blanche in the television series "The Golden Girls." Now, at 74, McClanahan is still working in television, after surviving a bout with breast cancer ten years ago. Her recent autobiography, *My First Five Husbands—And the Ones Who Got Away*, lends a personal and entertaining account of the off-Broadway production. McClanahan remembers being excited about the role in September 1966 when her agent submitted her picture and resume to producers of *MacBird!.* She recalls, "This was heavy stuff, a political satire speculating about LBJ orchestrating the Kennedy assassination, just as Macbeth murdered King Duncan with Lady Macbeth hectoring him to do it," but she was initially rejected for the role because her hair color didn't match Lady Bird Johnson's. The actor was persistent, however, and insisted her agent call back and "Tell them I do an authentic Texas drawl. And I'm a brunette." She donned a dark wig and "knocked them on their—ears—and was hired as Lady Macbird" (135).

McClanahan's gossipy, earthy tone in her autobiographical account is in keeping with her bawdy reputation as the saucy Blanche in the sitcom "The Golden Girls," and she minces no words when it comes to dishing backstage dirt: she complains of *MacBird!'s* "short-tempered" director, Roy Levine, who "didn't help much," threatened each actor in turn with dismissal whenever it seemed the production might be in trouble, and "was embroiled in a riotous, baleful love affair" with the blonde, English producer, who "visited his closet one night and slashed all his clothes to shreds" (136). McClanahan also describes William DeVane's anger about the seemingly endless Vietnam war. "Bill DeVane was obsessed with the cause, cussing a blue streak. Every other word he uttered was 'fuck.' 'Those fucking empty-fucking-headed schmucks! We've got to get out there and stop this fucking stupidity!' Someone was always angry" (137). Throughout her lively account, McClanahan recalls the production as extraordinary in every way:

> What a show! All the actors were as yet unknown: Stacy Keach, only 25 then, did magnificently well as MacBird, the Scottish Texas despot, in a leather kilt and cowboy boots. Cleavon Little was brilliant as one of the three witches. William DeVane was terrific as Robert Ken O'Dunc. The rehearsals were thrilling, the sword fighting energetic and exciting, the roles complex. The script was dark and riotously funny, enlarged from a treatise by Barbara Garson, a Berkeley student. (136)

She recalls that in spite of—or perhaps because of—the play's great success, the cast had to vacate the building several times because of bomb threats. "But," she writes, "nobody

ever blew us up." Such threats on the production did nothing to keep "lots of important personages" away from seeing the play first at the Village Gate, and later, in the summer of '67, uptown at Circle in the Square (136). McClanahan's anecdotal account of the play offers a unique behind-the-scenes perspective because, unlike Garson and others who embarked on the first production of *MacBird!*, she was not particularly interested in the radical aspects of *MacBird!*—only the access and leg-up it afforded her in show business. A glance at McClanahan's stage roles before and after *MacBird!* reveal a tremendous leap in her career, presumably as a result of the play's tremendous success; by 1969 she had won OBIE recognition for her role as Faye Precious in the off-Broadway "Who's Happy Now?" and by 1970 she had broken into television comedy, which became her mainstay ("McClanahan Biography").

Although critics never panned McClanahan for her performance of Lady MacBird, Garson felt disappointed by it and was never sure why McClanahan's and others' portrayals of the character left her cold. Quite recently, I visited with Garson and attended a commemorative staged reading of *MacBird!*, directed by Jim Zidar, at the Brecht Forum, a socialist organization in New York's West Village. Garson was thrilled with the show and expressed particular delight in the performance of Amy Hutchins, who read the role of Lady MacBird. As part of an ongoing conversation with Garson about my insistence that her re-imagination of Lady Macbeth is noteworthy from a feminist standpoint, Garson told me,

> First of all [the reading] made your point about Lady MacBird. I had always felt that I had maybe done a little poorly on Lady MacBird. This

> actress was actually the *best* Lady MacBird I ever saw—with her two rehearsals—because of the fact that she grew rather than shrank as the play went on, that she began to see the effect of what [MacBird] was doing, so that her second long speech is significant about what's happening to the country. And [MacBird is] just saying, "Oh there, there, Little Chuck," but what *she's* saying is the most significant—it's *there*, but it isn't so obvious when it's being played too broadly . . . I mean when the person can't change their tone as the shifts happen. (21 Oct. 2008)

It is important to re-visit the McClanahan's recollection of her interaction with Garson in1966, discussed previously in Chapter 3, when the play was first in rehearsal for the off-Broadway production: "'Why did you scramble [Lady MacBird's] part?' I asked the writer, hoping for some insight on how to play it. She replied, 'Oh I just stuck the role in because it was necessary to include Lady MacBird. I didn't give it any thought. You figure it out.' So I was on my own" (136). McClanahan goes on to imply that although she didn't understand the role, she "got laughs and had a helluva good time in my chiffon dresses and Texas drawl" (136), indicating that she, nonplussed, went on to play Lady MacBird as a flat Southern stereotype.

In an April 1967 *New York Times* review of the Village Gate production, as well as the then-newly released stereo LP version, which employed the voices of the original cast, Thomas Lask sheds light on McClanahan's interpretation: "Rue McClanahan as [MacBird's] lady has a drawling Southern accent that sounds like a caricature of a caricature" (120).

Garson's inadvertent feminist restoration of Lady Macbeth on a subconscious level in 1965, which I, a feminist scholar surfing on several waves of feminism, can easily spot, and McClanahan's inability to access the agency and depth of Lady MacBird in the text in 1966, while a similarly young, female actor in 2008 nails the role after two rehearsals, beg for examination under a feminist lens. I would conclude that the reason for Garson and McClanahan's inability to articulate or access the resonance of the character is that they were operating in the fog of peri-feminism. *MacBird!*, as Christa French, co-founder of the Weird Sisters Women's Theater Collective in Austin, most aptly expressed it, "is an indicator of the things that were stirring in women at the time Garson wrote it" (E-mail 22 Nov. 2008); the undercurrents of the women's movement seeped into Garson's writing on a subconscious level, but the oppression of women that still prevailed in the period blocked access to and understanding of what is now transparent to us. And this point extends to the female interaction around *MacBird!*, which in the case of Garson and McClanahan, failed to be effective as McClanahan, confused by the unexpected shake-up of a classic text and legendary female character, sought guidance from an author who was unaware of the significance of her own revision of the traditional and misogynist representation of that character.

Toby Cole: Representing Garson and *MacBird!*

Garson's association with Toby Cole, noted agent of radical playwrights during the Sixties, while not without its challenges, did prove to be a positive peri-feminist model of female networking in the Sixties. When it became evident that her play had hit a cultural nerve, and contacts in New York set out to produce it, Garson and her husband

followed *MacBird!* there. The couple sought a publisher and dealt with the sudden limelight that was cast upon Barbara, while the producers of the off-Broadway production controlled the play's stage activity and business in the United States, which would include such ventures as the *MacBird!* LP album and a professional touring company. But *MacBird!'s* vast international appeal prompted Garson to hire agent Toby Cole to represent her in the rest of the world.

Toby Cole began New York's Actors and Authors Agency in 1957 "with the aim of rehabilitating the careers of actors hurt by McCarthy era blacklisting, then went on to represent American and British writing that best reflected the antiwar and pro-underdog sentiments of the 1960s." Running her agency from a small office above Sardi's Restaurant, Cole was for sixteen years "an advocate for socially-relevant work." Julian Beck and Judith Malina, Zero Mostel, and Sam Shepard are only a few of the many rebel artists who offered their plays to her because of her "championing of outsiders" (Cole199). Cole writes,

> During the crest of the movement against the Vietnam War, I was proud to be associated with Barbara Garson's 'cause célèbre' antiwar send-up of President Lyndon Johnson, MacBird, which enjoyed a long run at New York's Village Gate. Unfortunately, when I eagerly gave the British rights to Joan Littlewood, an icon of British alternative theatre, her complete revision of MacBird's verse parody proved disastrous. (201)

Toby Cole died at the age of 92 in Berkeley, California on May 22, 2008. Ironically, and unknown to me at the time, when she died I was on my first brief research

trip to scout for *MacBird!* documents at UC Berkeley and UC Davis. Her death occurred the day after I discovered the *MacBird!* treasure trove in Cole's archival collection at Davis. Little did I know of my close proximity and missed opportunity ever to meet a woman who would become a hero and icon for me, not only in my quest to uncover the buried events surrounding *MacBird!*, but also in my quest to discover more about the accomplishments of women in the radical Sixties theater movement. Cole's archives reveal the intense drama behind her reference to Littlewood's "disastrous" production, which was central to the international clamor for rights to *MacBird!.* Cole's correspondence with Garson and scores of other people involved in the storm of interest in *MacBird!* also provides an inspiring character profile of Cole, who worked tirelessly and conscientiously to accommodate Garson and represent and her play internationally.

Toby Cole's representation of Garson extended, quite literally, throughout the world, as I have shown in the first section of my dissertation on the play's general history. She continued representing Garson and *MacBird!* through successful ventures in all corners of the globe, including a major production in Japan and a production directed by Augusto Boal in Brazil. Toby Cole's contribution to radical theater is immeasurable, as she dedicated her career to "promoting theatre of social significance" ("Toby Cole Krich, 92"). Cole's own assessment of her work with radical playwrights is, in the case of Garson and *MacBird!*, poignant and apt:

> Like any good agent, the best I could do for those I represented was to make it possible for their talent to shine. I did this by teaming them with the highest standard of artists, while serving as a buffer against rejection

> and a guard against poor choices and crass temptations. Through the hurly-burly of so many opening nights, I tried to maintain a standard of seriousness and excellence in keeping with my own tastes and beliefs. At the least Bond, Bellow, Arden, Gray, Handke, Garson and Shepard provided me and American audiences with unforgettable glimpses of how theatre can transform lives, awareness, and a society much in need of transformation. (Cole 202)

Joan Littlewood, Director of the London Production of *MacBird!*

The communication and relationships among the women involved in the London production are complex. I feature these female associations here not to illustrate any essentialist ideal, nor problematic nature in the dealings of women with one another, but—as evidenced by my detailed account of the "Littlewood Fiasco" in Chapter 2—the event was rare for its intersection of notable women of theater. The exchanges and outcomes of Garson and Cole's involvement with Littlewood—or Cole's agent in London, Suzanne Czech, who also happened to be a woman—included a variety of relational themes among the female practitioners, ranging through shades of negative and positive: doubt and reassurance; betrayal and trust; fickleness and stability; hesitancy and confidence; coolness and warmth. Regardless of the London production's disappointing outcome as far as Garson and Cole were concerned, it is fascinating that most of the key players in this professional theater venture—a business that was extremely male-dominated in the Sixties—and a production in which the stakes were especially high—were women. The fact that Littlewood's production was a disappointment to most has to

do with a variety of factors, but primarily with Littlewood's overhaul of Garson's play, which rendered it unrecognizable in comparison to the original. The story of the rise and fall of *MacBird!* in London does not reflect upon the sex of the people involved in terms of business savvy or artistic competence; Cole's, Littlewood's, and Garson's reputations cannot be disputed in light of their overall extraordinary accomplishments in these areas. But it is a fascinating story that reveals the powerful involvement of powerful women in theater of the Sixties.

Say what one may about her role in *MacBird!'s* history, Joan Littlewood "is the one woman consistently mentioned as a source of inspiration by other women directors" (Schafer 13-14), and although Littlewood resisted being labeled a feminist, her popularity among women theater practitioners is probably due to her reputation as having a definitively feminist directorial style, which rejects "the supremacy of the director, designer, actor or even of the writer" (Littlewood qtd. in Schafer 15). The latter statement, written by Littlewood in 1965, the same year Garson wrote *MacBird!*, reveals a philosophical and political kinship between the two radical activists who sought social change through theater.

Before rehearsals began, Garson and Cole were understandably thrilled that *MacBird!* would be in the hands of Littlewood, whose Marxist leanings and political objectives in doing theater lined up with Garson's; the match seemed perfect, and ideologically it was. But the success of Garson's play in the United States, and, as it turns out, abroad, depended upon attention and adherence to the playwright's carefully measured verse and artistically balanced plot. This need was, from the beginning, at

variance with Littlewood's collaborative and process-oriented method, whereby actors were encouraged to ad-lib, even in public stage productions, and which had already made her notorious for "riding roughshod over an existing text" (Holdsworth 39).

Joan Littlewood died in 2002, and little has been written in theater history about her direction of *MacBird!*; her biographer, Nadine Holdsworth, only mentions it briefly and in the context of Littlewood's unpopularity with critics, and Elizabeth Schafer calls Littlewood's direction of *MacBird!* "a kind of riposte" after being taken to task for a critically-bashed *Macbeth* production she directed ten years prior; *MacBird!*, Schafer writes, was "even less respectful of the traditionalist, dignified view of Shakespeare's tragedy" (153) than Littlewood's first go-around with the Scottish play. It is difficult to find any direct insight into the director's response to, or reasons for, what may have been her least successful moment in theater.

It is almost certain, given what we know about her brusque attitude toward anyone who complained about her work, that she would be, at the very least, unapologetic. Elizabeth Schafer, who had the great opportunity to interview the director, notes that "even . . . in her eighties, [Littlewood's] formidable ability to unsettle and upset has sometimes disconcerted her supporters as well as her political opponents" (19).

British theater aficionado, teacher, and historian, George Simmers, attended *MacBird!'s* opening night in London, and his memoir provides some confirmation of Littlewood's characteristic cheek in the matter:

> It was a jolly production, rather than a mesmerizing one, but I enjoyed it. My friend Dave and I hung around for a bit afterwards, and came across

> the author of the original piece, looking huddled and concerned. "It's not the play I wrote," she told us. I replied politely that I'd like to see a production of the original, and there was a voice behind us. It was a scruffy little woman, wearing a beret. "Go on, you put it on yourself then," said Joan Littlewood chirpily, obviously quite unrepentant at having mucked about with this young woman's work. ("Great War Fiction")

In my correspondence with Simmers, he defended Littlewood's production, saying that *MacBird!* is "essentially about the Bobby Kennedy/Johnson conflict . . . a question that might have excited a few political enthusiasts in Britain, but not a mass audience." Littlewood therefore, he claims,

> did what she'd done with unsatisfactory scripts before - tore them up and started again. Sometimes this was brilliantly successful, as with A Taste of Honey. Shelagh Delaney's original script was apparently very sketchy, a teenager's first effort. Joan L transformed it into one of the most important (and touching) plays of the period. Sometimes the method was a disaster, as with the musical Twang. The chaos of that production ruined several careers, including Lionel Bart's. (E-mail 1 Dec. 2008)

Joan Littlewood went on to direct her biggest commercial success, *Oh! What a Lovely War*, only a few months after the *MacBird!* fiasco. Unlike *MacBird!*, *Oh! What a Lovely War* was adapted from an unsolicited script that Littlewood processed collaboratively through her Theatre Workshop Company, and to this day, no definitive version of that script exists (Fletcher). The contrast between Littlewood's critical success

with an unformed, anonymous text, and her relative flop with Garson's meticulously composed one, lends support to Charles Marowitz's astute point about Littlewood's "half-baked effort" in her direction of *MacBird!*: "there was a clear collision between two antithetical styles: on the one hand, Barbara Garson's tightly knit parody and, on the other, the loose improvisational comedy playing of Miss Littlewood's Theater Workshop Company" ("Theater").

Like Garson, Littlewood "has largely been ignored in Shakespeare theatre history," in spite of her direction of significant and numerous controversial Shakespeare adaptations (Schafer 13). In an elegiac piece commemorating Littlewood's death in 2002, reviewer Jackie Fletcher of *The British Theatre Guide* laments, "all the books written about her work as a director, or her company, Theatre Workshop, went out of print donkey's years ago. Even the British Library doesn't have anything a scholar can use to get to grips with Theatre Workshop's remarkable history and vast creative output," and concludes, "Don't let one of our truly great theatre visionaries remain an unsung hero" (Fletcher).

Littlewood's achievements in the pre- and peri-feminist years before second-wave feminism are all the more remarkable in light of Elizabeth Schafer's bleak observation of the "woefully small" percentage of female directors still working today on the RSC mainstage. Schafer notes that when women do direct at Stratford, they are usually installed at The Other Place, which is "generally perceived to be an exciting, alternative space within the RSC, [but] it can only accommodate tiny audiences compared with the

mainstage, and when women directors work there they are perpetuating the cliché that women only direct in small, fringe venues" (240).

According to Schafer,

> What is most noticeable about women directing Shakespeare in the period of post-sixties feminism is that realistically speaking, if a woman wants to direct Shakespeare, she still stands a far better chance if she founds her own company, works in the provinces, works in fringe, works in a summer company, works in education—indeed if she works almost anywhere except the RSC. (240)

Joan Littlewood never directed a play for the RSC, and throughout the Sixties and Seventies, she worked marginally and without funding, as did most women directors of Shakespeare (230). Her involvement in *MacBird!* adds a fascinating and ironic dimension to the history of the play.

Considering the obstacles that have continued to block female agency in Shakespeare productions, Schafer concludes, "it is worth celebrating the fact that there is a history of distinguished, diverse and challenging direction of Shakespeare by women even though this history's very existence has been ignored for so long" (240-41). Perhaps this recounting of Littlewood's problematic direction of *MacBird!* serves, at least in part, to celebrate her controversial and extraordinary contribution to theater history.

Barbara Garson

It is fitting that I conclude my long discussion of *MacBird!* by focusing on Barbara Garson, the play's originator. According to a biographical piece in the *Scribner*

Encyclopedia of American Lives, the 66-year-old writer, whose youth and personal life are little known, "seems to have emerged into the world in the 1960s as a fully formed radical and a sophomore at the University of California, Berkeley" (Paulson). Garson had been married since the age of seventeen to radical activist Marvin Garson, and by the time she wrote *MacBird!*, she had already written numerous anti-establishment articles, had been jailed for subversive activity, and was a prominent member of various radical organizations, including the Young Socialist Alliance, the Campus Council on Racial Equality, and the United Front, as well as the Free Speech Movement (Paulson).

Garson went on to write several other plays, including the 1975 Obie Award-winning children's play, *The Dinosaur Door*, and was awarded a Special Commission from the New York State Council on the Arts for the Creation of Plays for Younger Audiences. She has also received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a National Press Club Citation, a Louis M. Rabinowitz Foundation Grant, the N.Y. Public Library Books to Remember award and *Library Journal's* Best Business Books of 1989 award, and a MacArthur Foundation Grant for reading and writing (Paulson, "Author").

A free lance writer, Garson has consistently written for well-known newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Village Voice*, *Ms.*, *Mother Jones*, *Progressive*, and *In These Times*, and she has written three books: *All The Live-long Day* (1975), *The Electronic Sweatshop* (1988), and *Money Makes the World Go Round: One Investor Tracks Her Cash Through the Global Economy, from Brooklyn to Bangkok and Back* (2001). In addition to her prolific work as a writer, she has continued

to be active in socialist organizations and causes, and in 1992 she was the running mate for Presidential candidate, J. Quinn Brisben, on the Socialist Party USA ticket, replacing Bill Edwards, who died during the race ("U.S. Leftist"). According to *Ron Gunzburger's Politics 1* website,

> Both the Greens and the Socialists have tried unsuccessfully to draft this self-described "little old Jewish lady" in recent years to run for various offices. Undeterred by these past failures, there was a small activist group with the SP-USA that again attempted to organize a "Draft Garson" effort. They believed Garson was known by the media, respected by the left, could help build the party, and was an articulate speaker for the cause . . . However, she did nothing to encourage the "Draft Garson" effort and it faded away in mid-2003. (Gunzburger)

Her persistence as a social critic and satirist is seen recently in a May 2008 op-ed article, written in the form of a letter to "Dear President Bush and Laura," and published in the *LA Times*, entitled "Give my stimulus check to the rich: Bush has favored the wealthy throughout his administration; why stop now?" in which she takes issue with the Bush administration's practice of doling out economic-stimulus tax rebates. The same biting sarcasm seen in *MacBird!* is still at work in Garson's style, as she explains to the President that she and her husband disagree on how to use their joint stimulus check of $1,200.00 and earnestly asks Bush to "arrange to have our refunds sent separately and to instruct someone at the IRS to forward my half directly to an economy-building investor -- perhaps you or the vice president can suggest someone suitable from among your

personal acquaintances." She also asks "marital advice" of Laura Bush: "How do you manage to make your wise and busy husband take your viewpoints as seriously as he obviously does?"

When asked by one reporter who reviewed her latest book whether she feels her books might impact the law, Garson responded,

> "Hmm, you notice I can't even conceive of a success whereby my arguments change policy. In the sixties I had about as great a success as you could have with a political book. 'MacBird!' sold half a million copies. But it was the movement not the book that brought about real changes. I simply entertained the movement. 'United we laugh' may be my slogan. Entertaining is still an important goal of my writing. In that respect I already have a success. 'Money Makes the World Go Around' is at least a lively read." (Barbara Garson about "*Money"*)

Regarding the effectiveness of her work in changing policy, Garson has repeatedly over time expressed doubt. Back in 1967, when the off-Broadway production of *MacBird!* was still only being previewed, Garson commented to the crowd her dismay that *MacBird!* had received relatively little harassment from the "Establishment" during shows, which "proves either that this really is a free society or that plays like this don't really matter" (qtd. in Sullivan). I recently I asked her why she thought *MacBird!* caused such a stir, and her reply was, "Because the movement was there and ready—not because it was such a phenomenal play" (Personal interview 21 Oct. 2008).

Whether in casual correspondence, an interview, a book on economics, a satirical article, or her groundbreaking *MacBird!*, the ideas and language coming from Barbara Garson reveal the keen intelligence, sharp wit, and self reflection of a woman whose life has been devoted largely to the betterment of humankind through creative political activism.

When *MacBird!* suddenly made it big, the danger, intrigue, and adventure of sudden fame must have felt overwhelming to the young activist as she was at once applauded and condemned throughout the nation for what had grown from a whim. Thrown suddenly into the fast-paced world of off-Broadway theater and professional publishing, she was faced with the responsibility of approving and denying offers from all over the world; scrutinizing translations of the text into languages other than English; and above all, guarding the integrity of her play. Barbara Garson's vision for *MacBird!* as a political piece and her insistence on protecting its artistic and political integrity never waned. Although the play became astoundingly successful, Garson never "sold out" on her original purpose: that the play be used as a political tool rather than a strictly commercial venture. In a mass E-mail Garson sent to advertise a commemorative reading at the Brecht forum in New York City to be held October 20, 2008, she wrote that even though "'MacBird' had dozens of productions around the world and sold over half a million copies as a book, the Brecht Forum, one of the few left centers that survive from the sixties, is exactly the kind of setting I originally imagined for the play." Garson added, "It should be a good occasion either to reminisce or to communicate some sense of the sixties to people who weren't there" (9 Sept. 2008).

After my several-years' investigation into the play Garson wrote forty years ago, I finally had the pleasure of meeting her face-to-face when I visited New York to interview her and attend the Brecht Forum reading. She demonstrated the same generosity, openness, and intelligence I had detected in letters she wrote as a young woman in the Sixties, and in recent phone and E-mail correspondence. At our first interview in her West Village apartment, she had taken upon herself the gracious task of preparing healthy snacks for the cast and crew of the upcoming reading. She mentioned more than once how grateful she felt toward the actors and director who were working on the project for free. I sat at the kitchen table as she chopped fresh parsley and basil, which she had grown herself in a community garden down the street. Garson moved quickly and efficiently, now peering at me across the table, now fielding questions from her husband, Frank Leonardo, or director Jim Zidar, both of whom were also present. Some of our first interview was conducted as she shouted comments to me from another room as she rummaged to fetch a text or artifact.

On the night of the reading, she excitedly greeted fans who had come to the Brecht Forum to see the play they had remembered from 40 years before. The theater was packed to overflowing as Zidar's hand-picked cast of 14 professional actors filed through a curtain and sat in a line of chairs that spanned the wide, flat stage. Garson sat in a chair on stage, in full view of the audience, as she listened intently to her play. The reading was riveting, as I predicted it would be, after having spent countless hours reading and critiquing it. I knew it was great material. I also knew how engaging it had been even in a cold reading held by the Weird Sisters Women's Theater Collective in Austin a month

earlier. When the reading ended, Garson stood and conducted a brief talkback, during which she insistently shifted the focus from herself, commending and thanking the director and actors instead.

In keeping with her generous character, Garson voluntarily granted me an extra interview during my brief time in New York. In our final session, she reflected on my question of why her play, which preceded and influenced the plays of her male contemporaries in radical adaptation of Shakespeare, had receded into obscurity while theirs had not. She replied, "Because I never did anything with it. How do you do that? It's out of print. I should put up a website or something. Schechner made a career out of being Richard Schechner; I never made a profession out of being Barbara Garson." I suggested that it was perhaps because her male contemporaries went on to write about their own work, and we agreed that the difference must have something to do with sustained self-promotion, a traditionally masculine practice, as opposed to the more private role of domesticity, which was still very much expected of women throughout the Sixties and into the Seventies. Garson illustrated the idea, using the example of Truman Capote and Harper Lee, who were friends and contemporaries in authorship:

> They each wrote one terrific book, but [Harper Lee] went back into her private life, and he continued to be Truman Capote—because for a man his career is everything. I can't imagine a man writing a great book and then saying "I'll just go into tree-planting, or I'll go raise children." He wanted success to begin with. Lee knew Capote. They were friends. I can't imagine a Truman Capote stopping. He stayed there in the limelight.

> How else is a man going to define himself? (Personal interview 19 Oct. 2008)

Garson interjected that unlike Capote, who sought fame, "Success was thrust upon me," but after a while, "I just said to hell with that—I'm just part of this movement," and she moved on. After Robert Kennedy's assassination, which seems to have been the primary reason Garson quit co-writing the screenplay for a *MacBird!* movie, she settled for a while in Tacoma, Washington to work at an antiwar coffeehouse. According to Paulson's brief biography of Garson, "a compelling factor in her decision to move was to escape the continuing notoriety and attention that trapped her as the author of *MacBird!*" (333).

Continuing in the vein of gender roles and writing, Garson explained that the late Sixties was "a point at which you might praise a woman for writing 'like a man,'" or, in other words, if she wrote a "real" play—not a "woman's play." She added "I had a child right after *MacBird!* (and as a product of it because I had the money); never since then have I written anything about which you could say [I wrote like a man] because it always has featured some aspect of trying to manage with a child" (21 Oct. 2008). As part of her assessment of "women's and men's work" as writers, she gave me a typewritten copy of an anecdote she had written for the book jacket of her friend, Ellen Alexander Conley's, book:

> I was walking down West 11th Street, trailing a shopping cart filled with cakes donated by local bakeries for the P.T.A. Fiesta Dinner, when I ran into Grace Paley. She was carrying an enormous pot of chili to the War Resister's Dinner at the Greenwich Village Peace Center.

> Grace, I asked, does Norman Mailer do this?
>
> We may not have time to write, she answered, but at least we have something to write about.
>
> Ellen Alexander Conley has something to write about.

As I chuckled about the anecdote, Barbara Garson mused, "One of the things about male writers is, their last book is always about writer-dom—problems with agents and whatnot. That's everybody's last book. If you're writing about being a writer, you're not in the world anymore. That's the end, writing about not being paid attention to. That's the last book. That's it" (18 Oct 2008).

What is Garson writing these days? It's not a "last book" about her writing. It's a play—a play with so many characters, she is sure no one will produce it. She chatted at some length about the problem of funding a play of Shakespearean proportions these days, as *MacBird!* was.

I asked if Garson had ever considered a revival/adaptation of *MacBird!* about George Bush—*MacBush!*, perhaps? Garson answered, no, if she had done it, it would have been *Oedipus Tex*. Director Jim Zidar, who once proposed collaborating with Garson on a faux Greek tragedy, said Garson refused on the grounds that "It wouldn't work for George Bush [because] he has no character. There's no depth to him, no inner doubt. He's two-dimensional, totally uninteresting as a character, not anything like LBJ" (Garson qtd. in Zidar E-mail 29 Nov. 2008). Garson's comment is reminiscent of critic Dwight MacDonald's apt conclusion in his early review of the script: "Miss Garson's

alienation is so drastic, her viewpoint so high above the struggle, that she can give us a sympathetic picture of MacBird."

I left our last meeting reluctantly, and as I strolled up Broadway, I thought of young Barbara Garson, whose zealous inspiration prompted her to write a skit for radical underground meetings and peace rallies. Instead, she set the world afire with *MacBird!*, a full-length, satirical play, unspeakably brash and vulgar for its time, and in so doing she blazed through the worn, brittle parchment of a false and patriarchal propriety that others had only begun to perforate.

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Vita

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